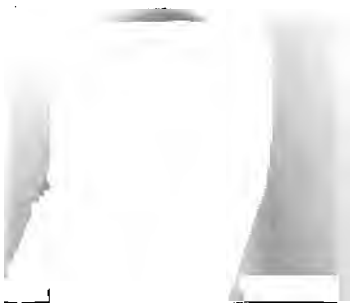

A SINLESS SECRET.

A SINLESS SECRET.

By "RITA,"

AUTHOR OF "MY LADY COQUETTE," "DAPHNE," "LIKE DIAN'S KISS," "VIVIENNE," ETC. ETC.

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CONTENTS.

A SINLESS SECRET.

CHAPTER XVII. (*continued.*)

TOO LATE.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOO LATE

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CHAPTER I.

THE FATAL NUMBER.

On the whole it was not to be wondered at that everyone loved her—that beside her Genna looked so plain and coarse and common.

She was so beautiful, so bright, so saucy of tongue and keen of wit. She had the straight brows and lustrous eyes, and dusky flower-like beauty of the race from which she sprang—the Tuscan race, who lived the free, honest, laborious life of sons and daughters of the soil, and were devoted to their birthplace, and loved their simple homes on the wind-blown

hills, and their fields of figs and olives, and vines and grain, as though they were life's fairest and noblest possessions—as indeed they were to them.

They were sisters, Nita and Genna, but they were thoroughly unlike—the one so beautiful, the other so plain. Nita was the younger, there being twelve years between them, and at first the elder sister had felt half jealous of the little brown-eyed babe, with its blossom of a mouth, and its flossy silken curls, and the love and tenderness it won from the mother, who never seemed the same after it had come. That feeling, however, passed off.

Each year Genna grew fonder of the little, laughing, toddling child, with her face like the bud of the rose-laurel, and her graceful supple form, and her feet that seemed always restless and tireless, flitting about from place to place like the bright-winged butterflies on the flower-stems without. True, she had all the care and caresses,

the devotion and labour of the house. True, that each year widened the difference between them, for as she grew to maidenhood and loveliness the other grew older and coarser and commoner, as so many of the Tuscan women do grow when the first flush of youth is past. And then their mother died and left Nita to her sister's care, and with her last breath besought her tenderest guardianship for her pretty, spoilt, wilful darling.

An uncle came to tend the farm, and take charge of them, Nita being then sixteen. He was a rough, fierce, moody man, though of generous temper, and honest to the core. But Nita disliked him always, and he was for ever grumbling at her for her idleness, her saucy rebellious tongue, her aversion to housekeeping, and her love of dancing and pleasure. He would have had her like the generality of the maidens around, content with household duties and household cares, with the work of the fields,

the hoeing, planting, and spinning, the straw-plaiting, the fruit-gathering, water-drawing, and other homely occupations, which sent them to bed with tired limbs and contented minds, looking for no better reward than a Feast Day holiday, or a new linen kirtle for some grand Church festival.

The women around were all strong, useful, hard-working, simple, and chaste; but Nita, gay, insolent, saucy Nita, who laughed at her numerous lovers, and delighted in nothing so much as the furious jealousy she raised—she was unlike all these, and offended him in every way, and with little compunction or penitence for the offence. So it came about that her sister had often hard work to keep peace between them, and was hard beset sometimes to screen Nita's offences from old Maso's eyes, and do her sister's share of household labour as well as her own.

Their cottage was a large low building, set high on the hills, with groups of cypresses and walnut-trees around it, and

a great slope of fields and vineyards on either side; other cottages and fields owned by different *contadini* lay here and there, the nearest being a mile from their dwelling; and far below lay the town, where fairs sometimes took place, and where wandering players set up their booths, and the young men and maidens met for the dancing and merry-making that were the delight of Nita's heart.

Few strangers ever came to them. Now and then a wandering artist, travelling on foot, would stray from the Savoy country on into Tuscany, and wander up the steep, bold hillsides, where the thyme and wild roses and myrtle grew in the sandstone soil, and the sweet-voiced nightingales sang through the long hot summer nights. Sometimes, too, they would paint a picture of the fields, either in the clear pale dawn, or when the brilliant moon shone overhead, and the sea of maize was aglow with the whirling fire-flies. Once a painter made

a picture of Nita, as he saw her standing in the sunlight with her arch brown eyes shining under her great straw hat, and the beautiful, supple, girlish form set against the glow of poppies and gold of corn and gleaming amber sky.

Genna begged him so earnestly for a copy of it that he gave her one, and at the next fair she secured a frame for it, and hung it up in the little, bare, white-walled kitchen, as the fairest and most exquisite of all their possessions.

Nita liked to see it there. It was a living memento of the flower-like beauty of which she was so vain; and, indeed, who could blame her that she was, for all the countryside were ever praising and extolling her loveliness, and the young men quarrelled about her from day to day? To win women's envy and arouse men's jealousy is the surest acknowledgment of a woman's beauty that she can ever hope to win. Nita had won it, and the triumph

gratified her far too well for Genna's liking —far too well for her own peace.

One summer's day the whole village was keeping the feast of Corpus-Christi; all the country people from far and near were coming in holiday dress, and bells were ringing over the hills from every village chapel, while the long procession wound its way with silken banners waving, and priestly vestments shining in the sun, and masses of flowers and garlands of leaves borne aloft, and the *contadini* in their white linen dresses, and the children chanting the *Laus Deo* with their young lovely voices, to which melody seemed as natural as song is to the birds.

Genna and Nita walked in the procession, Nita glancing ever and anon at her companions with pretty airs of coquetry that not even the solemnity of the occasion could subdue, and Genna with downcast eyes and grave sweet lips, parted in the melodious chant in which she

joined, and no thought in her heart save of the words she sang, as the procession wound its way through the waving wheat and under the boughs where the red cherries shone in the noonday sunlight.

A man lying lazily under the shade of the wayside trees looked up with indolent amusement as the procession went slowly by. It chanced that Nita, walking outside and on the road near to him, looked also, half curiously half shyly, at the strange face. He met her glance and returned it with one of bold admiration that sent the rich hot colour to her cheeks, and brought the heavy long-lashed eyelids down to cover the glorious eyes. Then she passed on.

The stranger's glance followed her with something of interest and surprise; then he hastily drew out a sketch-book and dashed in with bold rapid strokes that long, white, winding line, the dark background of hills, and the face that had met his eyes a moment before.

An impatient exclamation escaped him. "I can't do it from memory," he muttered. "Shall I see her again, I wonder?"

His eyes turned longingly after the distant procession, with its waving banners gleaming in the clear bright air, and the rich full melody of that glorious chant rolling in sonorous echoes over the hills around.

"Sure to," he continued, following up his thought. "She lives about here, doubtless. I must sketch her from life. Her face is perfect. It is just the face I want, too."

Then he rose, put away paper and pencils, and slowly sauntered down the hot stony road, and keeping the procession still in view, entered the town whither it was going to finish the celebration in the little church of the Misericordia. A little dusky, old-world, half-forgotten town it was, with nothing of note save its few churches and an arched bridge or two, and an ancient carved gateway some hundred years old, and narrow ill-paved streets, and

quaint tumble-down houses, picturesque enough to painters and artists, but models of dirt and discomfort in themselves.

The man was a painter, and had come from Rome. He was not a very great or celebrated artist, being poor and of humble birth, but full of a great ambition, and with an impatience of tongue and manner that had often marred his success. He had come here to gather subjects for a picture on which he was then occupied, and the intense quiet, the dreamy hush of the quaint old town, and the beauty of the country around had charmed him so that he stayed on from week to week, much longer than he had intended.

As he strolled along his thoughts were still busy with that scene. "It would make a good subject," he pondered. "Those beautiful cypress-crowned hills, that long, winding, snowy line, with the colours of the priests' vestments, and the gold fringe of the waving banners, and, above all, that intense blue

sky; and then the pure saint-like face of the one girl, and the lovely glowing beauty and great astonished eyes of the other as she looked up from her book. Oh yes, it would do well; and nothing pleases people so much as to see in a picture or a stage representation the very scenes which, if they did but open their eyes, they would see a thousand times over in every-day life—set in their very midst. It is a strange age—truly."

Later on, he entered the old gray church, where the people were thronging in crowds, and the sound of the chanting, and smoke of the incense, and tinkling of the tiny bell came out over the bowed heads and kneeling figures on the steps and in the streets.

He did not quite know why he entered —some impulse, for which he could not account, prompted him—but as he pushed his way through the throng he saw close

beside him the maiden who had attracted his notice in the procession. His eager eyes fastened on her, almost compelling her own to meet them by that magnetic force which lies in a long fixed gaze. She blushed even more rosily than before, but round the soft scarlet mouth a faint smile played. Nita was too used to admiration to resent it.

He remained standing beside her, only glancing from time to time at the dark-fringed eyelids that veiled her eyes—at the supple rounded figure, in the first sweet grace of early girlhood—at the flushed warmth of the cheeks — at the arched pouting lips, and with every glance becoming more fascinated with the girl's beauty.

At last the service was over. The murmur of prayers and chants of praise were silent. The crowds began to disperse, well pleased with the festival, and comforted, they scarcely knew why, by the mere fact of having heard or seen it.

The painter Anio stood aside and watched the Tuscan maidens pass out. He saw they were unaccompanied, and resolved to keep them in view. Walking in their rear, he heard the elder say: "Will you go home now, Nita, or not?"

"Home?" was the impetuous rejoinder. "No, I am going to Cecco, the coppersmith, now. His daughter, Teresina, has asked me. Will you not come too?"

"Nay, you know I am no friend of Teresina's, Nita. She has bold ways, and is sly of speech. I do not like her. I am sorry you should go there; nor do I think Maso would like it."

The brown eyes, so patient and sad, looked wistfully at the lovely wilful face, but met no answer to their entreaty save a shake of the head. "You and Maso would let me do nothing, and go nowhere, if you could have your way," said pretty Nita, pouting.

"Nay, dear, we only wish to keep you from evil company. It is bad for any

maiden to be talked about as Teresina is talked of here."

"Well, I am going there, so it is no use to say anything more," was the wilful rejoinder; and, satisfied with what he had heard, Anio slackened his pace, and turned away, an amused smile on his lips. "Teresina's friend," he said to himself. "'Tis easily managed then. Teresina is my model. She must bring this girl to me."

He walked swiftly up the narrow ill-paved streets, and stopped at a house close to the market-place. A girl was leaning out of a window overhead—a dark-browed handsome girl, with a discontented face and eyes clouded now with anger. The painter looked up.

"Not out? How comes that, pretty one?" he said.

She glanced at him, and her face flushed. "They would not let me," she said sulkily. "It was Lippa's turn, and one of us must stay and do the housework."

"What, on a Feast Day?"

"I was at early mass; but I go out again this evening."

"You will come down to me at the old place, will you not?"

"I don't know. I have a friend with me to-day. She comes from the hillside. It is a good distance, and I must walk home with her ere dark."

"Which road do you take? I will meet you."

The girl looked a little surprised at his eagerness, then pointed in the direction, and hastily withdrew. Looking round to discover the cause of her disappearance, he saw approaching a group of girls and youths, among them Nita.

Once again as they passed each other his eyes caught hers, and once again her own answered their appeal. "Three times," he murmured, passing on, while the laughing group swept by, "my fatal number."

CHAPTER II.

A MODEL.

RUFO ANIO was a Roman by birth.

His parents had been of the people, and he was their only child. At fourteen he had stated his determination to become a painter, and, regardless alike of persuasion or entreaty, had spent his time in self-culture, had studied and copied from the churches and free galleries, had made friends with the art students, and, finally, won his way to comparative success, though as yet he had achieved no triumph great enough to make him famous, as in his dreams he longed to be.

Apart from his passion for Art, he was fickle, insincere, and indolent—loving his

own pleasures, and taking them, when possible, with a total disregard as to who might suffer in consequence. He had a face that women loved, despite its expression of weakness and irresolution, and was gifted with a persuasive eloquence, a caressing manner, which led many to believe him in earnest when he was merely pretending the feelings he displayed.

He had set his mind now upon obtaining Nita as a model, and that idea absorbed him for the present. Throughout the day he sauntered idly here and there—now stopping to gaze at a marionette show in the square, or dream under some old broken gateway, where the walls had once been frescoed, but had now only the dim soft greens and grays of age. There was plenty of beauty in the old time-worn town—but the kind of beauty that would only charm the eyes of a painter or poet, and by most other people be disregarded.

It charmed Rufo, and gave him subjects

for many a sketch, to be afterwards enlarged and finished; and not till the dusk began to fall, and the dark streets looked darker, and the shadowy houses more shadowy, did he turn away and walk slowly over the bridge, and out into the steep stony road, where he knew Nita must soon be, if her friend kept her word.

That she did keep it was soon evident. Gay voices and girlish laughter fell upon his ear, and glancing back, he saw the tall handsome figure of the coppersmith's daughter, but not as he had anticipated—as Nita's sole companion. Some half-dozen other youths and maidens had joined them, and were evidently bound upon the same errand he had intended for himself.

However, there was no help for it, so, resolving to make the best of circumstances, he gave a gay greeting to Teresina, and walked by her side till an opportunity came of speaking to Nita. It soon offered itself—the little coquette knowing perfectly

well that this meeting owed nothing to chance, and being as desirous of exercising her fascinations on the handsome stranger as he was to succumb to their witcheries. From time to time, as some farm or homestead was reached, the escort diminished, for Nita lived farther from the town than any of her companions, and the young men who would gladly have accompanied her to her own dwelling grew sulky and angered at her saucy rebuffs and pretty impertinences, and left her finally to the care of Rufo and Teresina. Then it was that, seizing the opportunity for which he had longed all day, the young painter pleaded for the privilege of painting her from life.

Nita pretended surprise at his request. "I cannot tell," she said dubiously. "If Genna permits."

"And who is Genna?" he asked.

"My sister."

"Why should she not permit? There is

no harm in it. Your friend here has often sat to me."

"Yes; but Nita is watched like a cat-tortured mouse," laughed the coppersmith's daughter insolently. "What is allowed to me as a right will not be granted her as a privilege."

"Indeed you are wrong," said Nita earnestly. "Genna is very very good."

"Then try and persuade her—will you not?" said Rufo, in his most caressing tones. "If she loves you she will do whatever you wish. Who could help it?" he added in a lower voice, and with a glance that brought the hot bright colour to the girl's lovely face.

"You are foolish to ask her about it at all, Nita," said her friend contemptuously. "Do what I do. Invent an errand or excuse to the town, or roam over to the ruined monastery yonder. No one need know."

Nita looked doubtful. "It would not be right. Besides, I might be seen."

The painter smiled under his thick dark moustache. "How the sex repeats itself," he said to himself. "It is the fear of discovery, not the fear of wrong-doing, that keeps nine out of ten women straight."

But he spoke more softly and persuasively than ever. "I will meet you wherever you wish," he said. "I would take any trouble, only to have that beautiful face of yours on my canvas."

And the subtle flattery stole into the girl's heart. She hesitated. "Will the world see it—the picture, I mean?" she asked.

"Assuredly," he answered her. "It will be seen and talked of and admired everywhere—throughout the great cities."

She flushed with pleasure and gratified vanity. "Then I will come."

He thanked her, simply and cordially, and as if it were a mere act of courtesy which he had entreated, instead of a deception he had assisted to cloak. Then

with a few more words he left them, as her home was in sight.

Genna greeted her sister's friend more cordially even than her wont, she was so pleased to see Nita with no other company, for she had dreaded to find her escorted by the gay youths and idle careless maidens who were Teresina's most favoured associates. The coppersmith's daughter refused all offers of rest and refreshment, declaring she must hasten home or darkness would overtake her; but the truth was, she knew Rufo would wait for her on the road, and she was in haste to join him.

"And have you enjoyed your holiday, dear Nita?" asked Genna tenderly, as she set a draught of milk and some bread and tomatoes before her sister, waiting on her with a tenderness and pride at once motherly and unselfish.

The girl sighed and moved restlessly away from her caressing touch. "It was well enough," she said. "The puppet-show

was beautiful. There was a king and queen, and the queen had a lover, and then they were discovered and he was murdered—just like life."

"Oh Nita!"

"You are so foolish, Genna," pouted the pretty child. "Why, there was nothing wrong in that — was there? The very mention of lovers seems to frighten you. I suppose because you never had one?"

"No, dear, it is not that I mind your talking about them, but you treat them so unkindly, and you make them so jealous. Only last week Bruno and Tista fought about you with knives, and Tista is ill, dying they say now; and it is not right, Nita, to make sport of such things."

But Nita only laughed. "Why not—if they are so foolish? I did not want them to fight."

"But you were the cause, Nita, and Tista loves you so dearly; he would make you a good husband too."

The girl laughed merrily. "I have no fancy for marrying," she said. "Look at the women around, the household drudges, with not a thought beyond their potato-pot and their cabbages and their straw-plaiting, and the brown babies rolling about in their washing-baskets—all the dull, hard, coarse life, that is just eating, working, sleeping, one day like another, as the beasts."

"Why—Nita?" exclaimed Genna, in open-eyed astonishment.

"Oh yes! it is very well to say 'Why, Nita,'" repeated the girl angrily. "I do not care to spend a nun's life here for ever. I should like to go into the world and see the great cities, and all the wonderful things that we girls never hear of, buried as we are here. You do not care; you are content, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, caring for no greatness, only grubbing among your cabbages and forcing me to do the same."

"Nita—Nita! Who has put these

things into your head? Do you know what you are saying?"

The agony and entreaty of her sister's voice touched the girl to a feeling of momentary regret for her rash impatient words. Well enough she knew what a dull dreary unlovely life Genna's had been and was; yet no complaint ever left the patient lips—no murmur against the constant up-hill struggle with poverty and labour ever had entered her heart. She had a nature whose sunny content made her happy with very little; a nature so patient and enduring that it showed her no brighter lot which she cared to covet—no hardship against which she could rebel.

Her sister's words shocked her greatly, betraying as they did an inward discontent against the humble peace and safety of her life, and a longing for things unattainable, and therefore, to Genna's ideas, wrong.

"I did not mean to vex you," said Nita penitently; "but, indeed, I cannot help

wishing for what I said. The faces around me are always the same; everything here is dull, stupid, monotonous. I am sick of it all. If only I could get away—to Florence—Rome."

"To Florence?" echoed Genna in amazement. It was to her as if Nita had said the end of the world, even though from her own high hills she could see the white gleaming roofs of the City of Lilies. "To Florence! Oh Nita, my dear, you surely do not mean it?"

"I do," said the girl wilfully; "it is so foolish of you and everyone here just to live on and plod on, while a day's journey away lie beautiful towns and cities of which you know nothing—of whose marvels you will live and die in total ignorance. I would go away to-morrow if I could."

Genna looked at her with a helpless terror that would have been almost ludicrous, had not the passionate love in the pathetic brown eyes redeemed the face from its

childish bewilderment. Indeed, Nita had but spoken the truth, for the peasants often live and die within a score of miles of the cities, and never travel to see them once. Of any world beside their own hamlet they are as ignorant as children.

"Someone has been telling you about the cities," said Genna presently. "Who was it?"

The hot colour surged to the girl's brow at the question. "That is my affair," she said sullenly, and so rose and pushed aside her plate, and went off to her own little loft without another word.

Genna sat there, perplexed, terrified, bewildered. "What has come to the child," she murmured, while the great tears gathered in her eyes and fell down on her coarse rough hands, "I cannot understand."

And she could not, for God had given to these two sisters natures as different as drought from rain, as summer from winter.

Nita's words were all obscure to Genna—terrible, incomprehensible, full of ill in store.

From childhood she had been her one care, her one thought, the one poem of grace and sweetness and beauty in the dead level of her life. She clung to Nita with an intense fidelity. She was the sole ray of light in her long day of toil and ceaseless labour, though both labour and toil were alike unrecompensed, and performed simply from the sense of duty that to her meant life's strongest obligation. And now this simple, faithful, tender affection was as nothing to her who owned it—was not for one moment regarded as worth consideration beside the allurements of another life in which all was danger, and in which she could have no part.

"I am nothing to her," she said sadly, and the tears gathered in her great wistful eyes. She went to the room she shared with Nita and lay down to rest.

Nita was asleep, looking beautiful as a picture, with her flushed cheeks and tumbled waves of hair, and parted scarlet lips. Genna did not kiss her. She feared to waken her.

"She is but a child," she thought, looking lovingly at the beautiful face. "She did not mean it."

And so comforting herself with that thought she fell asleep, while the stillness and fragrance of the summer night wrapped all the quiet house in its own soft mantle of peace and rest.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST STEP.

WITH the next day's noon Nita, without a word to her sister, slipped away from the farm, and sped with swift impatient feet to the ruined monastery where Rufo was awaiting her.

It was a mile-and-a-half away, but the distance seemed nothing to the fleet-limbed peasant girl, and she ran lightly on, regardless of the hot sun, or the steep ways, or the beauty of the heights clothed with the emerald green of vines, or the great fields of golden maize, through which she flashed like a bright scarlet poppy herself.

She was breathless with haste when she reached the ruins; and there, in the old broken-down cloisters, where wild-flowers grew thick as the grasses, and the twining arms of graceful creepers wreathed the broken pillars, she saw the young painter.

He started, and went eagerly towards her. "You have come. How can I thank you?" he said, with a courteous grace to which she was wholly unused.

For once her coquetry failed; she flushed, and stood silent and embarrassed before him, finding no word to say.

"I will show you what I am doing," he said gently; and he drew out his sketch and placed it before her. "I am going to make it into a large picture," he continued, speaking rapidly, to hide her evident embarrassment. "You see this is a mere outline—there is the procession. Now, I want your face here, just as you looked when I saw you first. I have tried it from memory, but it does

not please me. Will you stand there—it is out of the sun?"

She obeyed. His quiet courteous speech, so unlike anything she had ever heard before, subdued and impressed her. It was like a revelation, this handsome man, with his deference and his refinement; for Rufo, by mingling much with scholars and artists, and by reason of a certain adaptability and readiness to imitate, in his own nature, might have passed into any society with credit and success, none dreaming that he was not well-born.

The girl took up her position where he had desired her, and he went on with his work rapidly, and with zest. He sketched her face only, and that with a quickness which amazed her. Then he went further to that rich portraiture which colour alone gives, and dashed in the lovely glow of the face, with its carnation bloom on cheek and lips; the great lustrous eyes, so soft and shadowy, with that look, half pleased half

startled, that had first attracted his attention and lived in his memory then as on his canvas now.

The sun was sinking slowly to rest as he finished and laid down his brush with a sigh of relief. "You make an excellent model," he said. "You are so still. Would you like to see yourself?"

"Yes, if I may," she said, half glad half shy still, and drawing near with a hesitation that seemed to him enchanting.

He turned the picture towards her, and her eyes fell on her own face as it looked back from the white colourless depths of the cardboard. She started, and a faint cry escaped her. That she was so lovely as this she had not imagined. The portrait which the old painter had done for Genna was very different, both in execution and workmanship, and a certain languor and delight crept over her as she gazed on and on, while the vain passion it excited crept like poison through her veins.

"Am I like *that?*"

"Indeed, yes," he answered. "Did you not know it?"

She covered her face with her hands, and turned away with a low glad laugh of triumph, wonder, and delight.

Then a shadow fell across her face. She turned and looked at him. "And I am buried here!" she said discontentedly.

"It is a hard fate for one of your sex and beauty," he answered. "The world yonder would throne you higher than your townsfolk do if it had the chance."

"If it had the chance," she murmured brokenly. "Oh, if only it had!"

He looked at her curiously. "You have not much heart, fair as you are," he thought, "and already you have taken the first step in the downward path—discontent." Aloud he said: "That rests with yourself, surely!"

"She looked at him in amazement. "With myself! How?"

"A woman so young and lovely as your-

self need never be at a loss to make the world hear of her."

"But I am so poor and ignorant. I have not a friend. I just live on here from day to day, from week to week; it is just as I said to Genna, always the same—a life like the oxen and the mules lead—plodding, wearisome, and with a sameness that sickens me."

He laughed with evident amusement. "Impatient bird, to long to quit your nest of safety and shelter! Ah, it is always so with the young."

"You roam—is the world very beautiful?" she asked eagerly.

"Very. But I am not a woman."

"Why cannot we see and enjoy it too?"

"Why? Oh, because to the young and fair of your sex the world is like a wide-spread net that traps the helpless birds, and, once having captured, holds them for ever."

The girl looked away from him over to

the sun-crowned hills where the golden light still softly lingered. Her mind was restless and ill at ease, and full of impatient desires. What could this "world" be like? she wondered. The more she thought of it, the greater grew her longing to behold it—the longing for wider spheres, for forbidden delights, that is inborn in women so often, and as often terminates in their eternal misery and suffering.

"I do not believe it," she said at last, answering his words. "A trap—well I would escape, or break the meshes."

He laughed aloud. "It might baffle your strength, pretty one. But tell me, why are you so set upon wandering hence?"

"I am tired of life here, that is all."

"Tired? Well, it is not to be wondered at. It must be monotonous enough. But take my advice—wait till your wings are full-grown before you test their strength, otherwise your flight will be but short."

"What do you mean?" she asked im-

patiently. "When I fly I will soar high, like the hawk. I will not be content to rise and then fall."

He looked at her musingly. "You will not want much assistance," he said. "You will soon forget the nest that has sheltered, the hand that has fed you. Well, it is the way of youth and—womanhood!"

She flushed angrily. "I am not ungrateful," she said, "but can one help being tired?"

"Certainly one cannot," he assented readily. "Are you tired of your home here?"

"Genna is very good," the girl said reluctantly, "but then——"

"What then?" he asked, with a curious interest in drawing out this character, and the selfishness and impatience that might so easily be its bane.

"Oh, nothing—only she is dull and patient and—ugly. It is easy for her!"

"Certainly the virtues seem easier of

attainment when a woman is ill-favoured," he laughed, with ready amusement. "And is Genna your sister of whom Teresina spoke?"

"Yes."

"But she loves you very dearly?"

"Yes, but it is selfish to wish to keep me buried here. I did but speak of Florence yesterday, of how I should like to see it, and she was as shocked and frightened as if I had said something wicked."

"What would you do in Florence?" he asked curiously.

"See it, of course. See its beautiful streets, and the theatres and churches, and all the lovely things it holds, and how the great ladies are dressed, and the palaces where the nobles live. Oh, it would be beautiful!"

"It would but make you more discontented with your life here afterwards. Perhaps Genna is right."

"You too are against me, then? One

would think it was wrong to wish to leave one's home, even for a little while."

The lovely, pouting, wistful face looked up at him so reproachfully that he forgot all prudence.

"Pretty one, it is not of wrong or right I think—it is only of your safety. Have men no eyes, think you, for such beauty as you possess? It might bribe a king!"

She looked at him with wonder.

"There are dreams which end in peace and happiness," he went on rapidly, "and there are dreams which see greatness and wonder, and the dazzling sceptre of power, and end in misery and sin and shame. The last dreams are yours."

She looked frightened. "Why?" she asked timidly.

"Because you are of the humble of the earth; because your lot is cast in loneliness and obscurity, and you pine for freedom, riches, and power. Can you deny it?"

She drew a long breath. "I do long for

these—but why cannot I have them in safety and honour? Other women do."

He smiled. "Ask Genna," he said.

But she hung her head, and moved impatiently away.

He hastily put his painting materials together, and followed her. "Have I angered you?" he said softly, as he came to her side, and bent down to look at her flushed petulant face.

"No," she said impatiently. "You are only like all the others—you treat me as a fool."

He looked astonished. "A fool! Pardon me, I think you the very reverse. It was but for your own good I spoke."

The gentleness of his voice touched her. Before him she felt how coarse and common and ignorant she must appear, and a strange shame held her speechless.

"Will you come again?" he asked presently. "I have the face, but I want the figure."

"You can come to the house then, and ask Genna yourself," said the girl petulantly. "I did but promise for once."

But he noticed the quick beating of her heart under her bodice, the rich colour flushing and waning in her cheek. "Very well," he said calmly; "she looks too good and kind to refuse. I will ask her."

The surprise in her face as she turned it towards him sent a thrill of amusement through his heart.

"Shall I go with you home now?" he continued.

"If you will," she answered, a little sulkily. This coolness and self-possession asserted itself over her wilful nature too utterly for rebellion.

"Supposing she refuses?" he asked smiling.

"Then you must do without me," she replied. "You can take Cecco's daughter for your model, as you did before."

"Her figure would not correspond with

your face," he answered coolly. "Genna herself would be better."

The girl laughed aloud. "Genna! She in a picture! The saints be gracious! what next?"

"She is going to be in this very picture," said the young painter. "I want her face beside yours. I like the calm devotional look she bore at the Corpus-Christi festival. I am going to ask her to sit to me."

The girl was too astonished to reply; a little jealous too, that this handsome young stranger should be less susceptible than she fancied he would have proved. To talk of Genna and herself in the same breath; why, it was absurd!

They walked on for some moments in silence. "Why, there is Genna!" cried the girl suddenly, as she pointed with her finger to a solitary figure standing in the narrow stony path beyond, and shading her eyes from the sun's rays as she swept the landscape with an eager glance.

She caught sight of the two figures, and came rapidly towards them. "Nita, where have you been?" she began reproachfully.

The painter took off his wide-brimmed hat and bowed low. "I am the culprit," he said. "I met your sister, and have been painting her."

"And he wants to paint you, Genna," said her sister maliciously.

The brown homely face flushed with surprise. She was too much used to seeing artists wandering here and there through the fair Tuscan country to be surprised at his appearance, but that he should desire to paint her seemed utterly impossible.

"It is quite true," said the young man, meeting her astonished gaze with one of deep respect. "I am engaged on a picture of the Corpus-Christi procession. I saw you and your sister taking part in it. It would be an inestimable favour if I might paint you from life. Will you grant it?"

"I am so busy always," she murmured.

"It will not detain you long," he pleaded earnestly, "and any leisure time you can spare would suit me."

Genna looked at Nita's flushed petulant face and grew more confused.

"Don't be so silly, Genna," said her sister. "It's nothing so dreadful. Surely you can for once spare an hour from that eternal washing, and hoeing, and straw-plaiting, to please someone else."

And Genna, colouring and hesitating, answered bashfully that he might come at noon the following day, and she would give him a sitting.

"That plain sister is worth a hundred such vain little fools as the other," thought Rufo, as, after many courteous thanks, he left them, and was walking rapidly homewards. "But it is the other men will love."

And he was right, for Genna had not one lover, and Nita—Nita had the whole countryside at her feet, and already claimed the young painter as her last conquest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOTH AND THE CANDLE.

Not one day only, but many, did Rufo Anio come to the house on the hillside, and his picture grew rapidly, and the faces of the two girls set side by side on his canvas were lifelike in their resemblance, and admirable foils to each other, the one so glowing and lovely, the other so calm and sweet.

And, meanwhile, though it was to Nita that the young painter talked most, and to whom he gave ready jests and merry smiles, yet for patient quiet Genna he reserved his deepest feelings; she alone knew of his life, his struggles, his ambitious hopes, and

she alone, too, read the weakness and irresolution of character that marred so many of his best efforts, and the languid selfishness that was so difficult to rouse and so easy to minister to.

It was a new thing to Genna to be treated with consideration and respect, and the gentle deference and courtesy of the young painter's manner touched her far more deeply than he ever suspected. In all her rough hard life no one had ever seemed to care for any feeling or desire of her own, and now she had found one being who never mocked at her want of beauty, who never slighted or neglected her even for the lovely younger sister's attractions.

It was a terror and yet a joy to her to be in his presence, to hear his voice, to meet his eyes, to have the chance touch of his hand on her head or shoulder as he moved or changed her position from time to time. Her face seemed to glow with happiness; the rich colour burned in

feverish brilliance on her dark cheek, and gave lustre to the great pathetic eyes, and even transfigured the patient homely face, which he had honoured—so she deemed it —beyond all words by placing on his canvas.

"I am sorry I have to hide your eyes in my picture," he said one day. "They are so beautiful!"

The words brought the hot blood leaping to her face, and filled her with a strange and passionate delight. "Beautiful!" that he should have applied that word to one attribute of hers seemed a wonder too great for credence. It seemed to change her whole life to rapture—not with the gratification of vanity, but the marvel that one human being had thought her worthy of such praise. He did not know what a tumult of emotion he had roused in the breast of his quiet model. She sat there, still and motionless as a statue of marble —her long lashes covering her eyes, and

only the flush on her dusky cheek and the tremble of her locked fingers betraying any agitation.

"Are you tired?" he asked her, as he laid down his brushes at last, and so released her from the strain of her attitude.

"No," she said quietly, as she rose with an odd dazzled look upon her face. "Tired of resting? that would be strange indeed."

"You do not often rest, it seems to me. Why does not Nita help you more with your household labours?"

"She is different," the girl said gravely. "Work is natural to me. I have always been used to it."

"And spared her? Is it not so?"

She looked at him with grave rebuke.

"She is so young and beautiful. It is not fit she should do all the rough hard services needful here. But she is very good. She would always help me if I wished."

"Knowing very well that if you wished

it ever so much you would not say so. How unselfish you are, Genna!"

She coloured hotly at his praise.

"No, indeed," she eagerly disclaimed, "I do but little, and I am often discontented and rebellious too. It is, as Nina says, a monotonous life and often wearisome."

"Where is your sister now?"

"In the fields, I think. She told me she was going to help there this afternoon."

"It is her turn to sit to me to-morrow," said the young painter. "She does not make such a good model as you, Genna, she is so restless and impatient."

The girl was silent. His words disturbed and perplexed her, and made her half afraid of the joy they gave. Across the barrenness and hardness of her life his face, his voice, his praise, fell like sunshine over darkness, giving her a tumultuous pain, a rapturous dreamy emotion, as new as they were inexplicable.

He looked at the softened and perplexed

radiance of her face with a certain wonder and reverence in his own.

"If there were more women like you in the world, Genna," he said impulsively, "the world would be a great deal better than it is."

"Oh hush!" she said with evident distress; "do not say such words to me. You do not know what I am."

"No," he said, with involuntary reverence, "I do not know one half your goodness and unselfishness; even if I did they would only shame the idleness and weakness of my own nature."

"Yours!" she cried, looking at him with wonder and admiration in her eyes. "When you are so great?"

"I great!" he laughed mockingly. "If you were not so ignorant of the world's opinions, child, you would not apply that word to me."

"Does the world not heed you, then?"

"As yet, no. I have no gold to buy

its smiles — no friends to influence its favours. For the rest, if I possess any gifts, which I doubt often, they are not powerful enough to command success, perhaps even to deserve it."

"You are great to me," she said humbly, looking at him with a wistful comprehension of his words that touched him deeply.

"Because you do not know what greatness really is," he answered impatiently. "The fame, the honour, the wonder of one's fellow-men."

"I should not call *that* greatness," she said softly, as if half-ashamed of her own temerity. "The praise and wonder and admiration of men are all very well: but if one knows one does not deserve them?"

"They are just as sweet, perhaps sweeter," he answered.

"Not if a man is true to himself, or to the gifts which God has placed in his keep-

ing. It is no true fame, no real greatness, to obtain what one is not worthy of."

The imperfect utterance of this homely and untrained intelligence spoke a truth that struck home to her hearer—that surprised and shamed him at one and the same moment.

Full well he knew that the desire for fame which filled his breast and animated his efforts, was not a desire springing from a noble consciousness of his own deserts, but rather a feverish longing for the showers of gold, the homage of flattery, the sweets of adulation, that make up the ephemeral triumphs of a life-time, not the lasting tribute that future ages will pay to the deserts of genius.

"You are right, Genna," he said, suddenly. "I do not know where you get your wisdom, but it is worth all mine gathered from the lips of men, from the teaching of cities. We poets and painters are no better than the rest of mankind, perhaps worse; we know the truth, yet

disguise it. We teach lessons, yet never attempt to practise them. We praise renunciation, yet hanker after the flesh-pots of Egypt in our secret hearts—we look up to the sun, but our feet remain fixed in the mire."

"*You* should not be so," she said, looking gravely up at the young handsome face before her.

He bent down and lightly kissed her hand. "Nor would I, dear Genna," he said, with an involuntary softness in his voice that was not feigned. "Nor would I, if such a woman as yourself were beside me always."

The words frightened, gladdened, bewildered her. To be of any use, of any worth to him——

That thought was too full of ecstasy for aught but silence and solitude. She broke away from his detaining hand, and fled to her room and threw herself down, with her heart throbbing as if it would burst, her

limbs quivering, her face burning. His words had roused in her a passion strong as fire, pure as crystal. She felt as if she could have laid her life down at his feet for the supreme bliss that he had given her with that caress of his lips, that involuntary entreaty which had thrilled his words.

She was untrained, coarse, ignorant—that she knew—and yet she was of use, of worth to him who was to her as a king among men. She had no guide, except her instincts of purity, fidelity, passion; but they were instincts both great and lofty, and would never lead her astray, even amidst a torture of suffering, a fire of temptation.

With her brain throbbing, her heart racked by a tempest of emotion, she lay where she had thrown herself, with only the memory of his words, the joy of his praise, filling all her senses, excluding all other thoughts.

When she at length started to her feet she felt ashamed of her forgetfulness of

other matters, of her neglect of the household duties so long her sole care. She smoothed her heavy shining tresses, and went to the kitchen, and scoured the metal pans, and peeled the vegetables for the soup-pot, and set the evening meal ready for the return of old Maso and Nita, and all the time her heart felt so light, so happy, her lips were singing gay, glad, bird-like snatches of song.

Had he not kissed her, praised her? She who unto herself, and even to others, had so long seemed a stupid, coarse, unlovely peasant. The wonder and gladness of the thought were always with her, lightening her labour, beautifying her homely face, making even toil light, and work a pleasure.

The sun had long set—it was growing dusk. The meal was ready, the brick floor clean swept, and through the square unglazed window she looked anxiously from time to time, wondering why Nita did not return.

Old Maso came in presently, hot, tired, and hungry. She served him with soup, and placed a fresh-cut lettuce and a slice of coarse brown bread beside him.

"Have you not seen Nita as you came through the fields?" she asked at last.

"No," he said curtly, for his faulty thoughtless niece was no favourite of his. "Is she gadding about again? She will get into harm yet, if she heeds not. No maiden should be so free with her speech and actions as she is."

"You are hard upon her," pleaded Genna. "She is young, and has the faults of youth —that is all."

"It is well you think so, Genna. If you made her share your labours, and kept her more at home, 'twould be better for you now—for her in the future."

But Genna paid no heed. She was accustomed to her uncle's grumblings about her sister by this time, and knew they

would last as long as he was there to grumble.

She lit the lamp and cleared away the platters, and then went to the door, and stood there looking out with happy dreamful eyes.

The bats flew by in the hot, sweet darkness, flapping their wings as they touched the silent figure. The grilli hummed about in the grasses, the fire-flies danced in the corn; above soared a great, golden moon, lighting all the dense, dark blue of the sky, paling all the quivering luminance of the stars.

"The world is very fair," thought Genna, for her heart was happy with a happiness it had never known. She wished Nita would come in. She would like to have told her of some of the gladness and peace she felt. Nita, who had lovers innumerable, would not grudge her this one. Then she flushed hotly. Lovers! Was she thinking

of such folly—she, with her plain face and simple ways, and her total lack of all feminine charms? And yet——

"And yet he *seemed* to care!" she told herself softly, and blushed and smiled at the thought. Then she went within.

"If only Nita would come," she said.

But the night deepened and Nita never came.

CHAPTER V.

FLED!

It was five in the morning. Old Maso had led the oxen out to pasture and was at work in the fields. Genna was bustling about her work—busy, happy, content as ever.

"It was not kind of Nita to be so long absent," she thought. "But, doubtless, Cecco's daughter had persuaded her; she was fond of keeping the pretty, merry maiden with her."

No thought of ill or harm crossed her mind. Nita was thoughtless, and had taken it into her head to stop away—it was

not the first time she had done so, in spite of her sister's grave rebukes. She would be home by noon, no doubt. Noon! That thought brought a smile to her lips—a light to her eyes that made her face radiant. Noon would bring Rufo here once more. She blushed with delight. Would he remember what he had said, she wondered, and, so wondering, went busily about the house, singing for very gladness.

The sun grew hotter and brighter, the noon hour came and passed; then, for the first time, a dim sense of uneasiness crept into Genna's heart.

Neither Rufo nor Nita had come. As hour after hour passed her fears increased. "Could the child be ill?" she thought.

Suspense grew unbearable. She set the meal ready for Maso against his return, and then went forth with the resolve to seek for Nita in the town. Such conduct as this she had never been guilty of—from the noon

of one day to the sunset of the next she had absented herself with no word of explanation whatever. Genna could not understand it. She went swiftly down the hill-side, and over the rough stony road. The evening had fallen suddenly, as it does in this land where the great hills rise so high one behind another; the fire-flies sparkled everywhere in the soft gray gloom; here and there came the sound of a nightingale's voice, or the hum of the insects in the grass. But Genna was deaf to all. She only hurried on with swift, impatient feet, crossing the bridge and river with never a glance, and so on through the old gateway and up to the deserted market-place, and then stopped at Cecco's house.

The coppersmith and his family were at supper, and looked up in surprise as she entered. Her eyes glanced quickly round, then her face paled. "Is not Nita here?" she asked.

"Nita!" cried a chorus of voices. "No,

certainly not. We have not seen her for days."

Genna staggered, as if a blow had struck her. "Not here?" she cried. "Was she not here last night? Oh, where can she be?"

Teresina looked at the girl's frightened face with wide-open eyes of astonishment. "Was she not at home last night then?" she asked.

"Would I be here asking for her had she been at home?" cried Genna fiercely. "I tell you I have not seen her since noon yesterday."

A clamour of voices and exclamations rose at these words. "Where could she be? Whither had she gone?" No one could suggest anything, though all were ready to wonder and conjecture. Genna alone stood there quiet, motionless, and pale, a great terror in her heart, an agonised dread in her eyes.

"It is very strange," said old Cecco, "but

I always said Nita would come to harm with her idle ways, and her vanity and foolishness."

"Do not reproach her," said Genna, in a strange, wistful voice. "I—I cannot bear it."

"Let me come with you to see if she is with any other of our neighbours," said Teresina, rising from her place at the table. "Maybe she is only passing a day with a friend, though it is odd she should never have said so."

Genna looked at her gratefully. "Yes, let us go," she said.

But when they were without, in the quiet dusky streets, Teresina suddenly paused. "Genna," she said, "have you seen aught of Rufo, the painter, to-day?"

The girl trembled in every limb. "Why do you ask?" she faltered. "You do not suppose ——"

"I suppose nothing. Only it is odd that he and Nita, who were always so much

together, should have disappeared at the same time. Rufo left here this morning with all his chattels. Did you not know?"

Genna looked at her. The light of the new-risen moon shone on her face, which was ghastly as death—her great pathetic eyes had in them a look of agony, of appeal, that touched even the careless, vain nature of the girl who had been Nita's friend—it was like the look of coming death in the eyes of a dumb animal. "Oh no, it cannot be! It cannot be!" she moaned.

"We will hope not. Let us hasten and inquire of the neighbours."

Genna did not speak. She moved mechanically from house to house, from street to street, while Teresina made all the necessary inquiries, and to all of them received but one answer. "Let us go to his house," said Genna at last, in a hoarse, cold voice that startled her companion.

"It will be useless," the girl answered; but, nevertheless, they went.

The painter's room was in total darkness. The woman who let it brought them a light, and answered Teresina's questions volubly enough. "Yes, it was true—the signore had left that morning very early. No—no one had come there before or since his departure. He had given no explanation; he had paid her generously, and said sudden business called him back to Rome."

"To Rome!" Genna started—here was a clue at all events.

Then a sickening, weary feeling stole into her heart; she remembered Nita's words a few days before—her longing to see cities, her weariness of the dull, monotonous home-life. But yet she strove to banish these doubts bravely, staunchly. Nita was pure, good, honest. She would not surely listen to any tempting that would bring ruin, shame, misery, on her own head and on those who loved her.

She stood there in the silent, empty room that for her had so terrible an

eloquence. Was he, too, false? she wondered.

Teresina's voice roused her at last. "Come," she said. "We can do no good now. She must have gone with him."

The words roused Genna.

She flashed one burning, indignant glance at the girl. "You are her friend, yet you are the first to speak ill of her," she said: and then waiting for no reply turned swiftly away, and took herself homeward with blind, miserable eyes that saw nothing, and steps that found their way by sheer instinct to the deserted, lonely home.

"She has gone with him! She has gone with him!"—those words alone echoed and re-echoed in her brain, and her great, brown eyes grew black with heavy wrath and desperate fear. "They have deceived me—both," she thought, in her agony, and no longer could any belief in her sister's innocence bring comfort or ease to the pain which racked and tortured her.

"And I can do nothing!" she moaned, as she crossed the threshold and looked round the familiar place. "Nothing—only wait." Her eyes fell on the picture on the wall—the picture of the bright, laughing loveliness that had been to her so beloved and cherished a thing.

A strange laugh fell from her lips—a laugh more terrible than any sob of anguish, than any tears of pain. "Is this my recompense—after all?" she said.

Then she fell down on the cold, brick floor, like a felled log. For a space all was darkness; she remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER VI.

GENNA ALONE.

No shade has come between
  Thee and the sun;
Like some long childish dream,
  Thy life has run.

But now the stream has reach'd
  A dark deep sea,
And Sorrow, dim and crown'd,
  Is waiting thee.

Adelaide Proctor.

For days the whole country-side could talk of nothing else but Nita's disappearance.

It was not quite unprecedented, for there had been times when some Tuscan maiden, weary of her home or her life of toil, or beguiled by the syren voice of some stranger-youth from the cities far beyond those quiet

hills, had stolen away at dead of night and never come back any more. The story of Nita was in no way strange—it was common even in its sadness and baseness. But the girl had been so fair and so loved, and had made her sunny beauty and ready wit so universally known and admired, that her absence left a strange blank among them.

But it was only Genna who suffered. Genna, who seemed so cold, and hard, and stern now—who avoided the town and all belonging to it—who plodded on dully, uncomplainingly from day to day and week to week, and lit her tapers at the Madonna's shrine in the little chapel on the hill-side, and spent her leisure hours in prayers and penitence for Nita's sake—Nita, who had forgotten and deserted her without a word of regret.

Old Maso took the matter very coolly. "It was nothing more than he had expected," so he said, "and it served Genna right for encouraging these idle painter-

fellows to come round the house, filling girl's heads with nonsense, and making believe they were beautiful as angels, till they grew too vain to be of any use or good at all."

Poor Genna felt a hot flush of shame scorch her brow at those words. She remembered the painter's praise of herself—and her own delighted acceptance of and belief in it. She felt mad with abhorrence of herself when she remembered her folly; she scourged herself with bitter reproaches every time it recurred to her mind and humiliated her afresh.

Poor Genna! She knew that she had loved him ere she herself was aware of it, and she dreaded lest some look or word might have betrayed her. How he must have mocked at such folly—he and Nita! That thought brought fresh agony in its train. Both her sister and her lover, perhaps, had made sport over this in secret—he blinding her eyes to his real motives by pretended reverence and admiration, while all the time——

She hid her face in her hands and shivered with the cold sickening chill that had come to her with the first knowledge of Nita's baseness and of his perfidy.

"If only he had never come," she thought in her misery. "But a little while ago, and I was content—now, ah, life is all changed. It can never be the same again."

Yet she went about her daily work uncomplainingly as ever, giving herself no rest. She dared not, because idleness and rest brought back memories that hurt, and thoughts that maddened her; and in labour, however weary, and toil, however great, she could alone find peace from either.

Slowly the years passed on, bringing but few changes to the quiet town and the dwellers on the hill-side beyond its gates.

Genna was alone now. Old Maso had died of a cold, caught by damp and exposure in severe winter-time, when the river had overflowed its banks, and flooded

the country for miles around. The chill had settled on his lungs, and he had neglected it in his belief of his own strength and hardihood. So one morning when Genna went to his bedside she found him too ill to rise, and a few days after he died. The girl sorrowed greatly. He was her only friend, and life was very lonely to her now.

Of Nita no word had ever come—no token of remembrance—no sign of her existence. She was well-nigh forgotten, even by those who had been her lovers and friends. Genna alone remembered. Genna—with her calm sad face, her quiet wistful eyes, in which there always seemed a longing so great, a sadness so deep.

She lived on alone in the old desolate house, taking a *contadino* for the hard farm work, and toiling incessantly herself. The days were often long, wearisome, monotonous; there was no one to care for, to think of, now, and her woman's

heart hungered for such things. From her life all ministry of love seemed utterly banished; but she bore it cheerfully, uncomplainingly as ever, only she was never glad now.

One evening Teresina, the coppersmith's daughter, came to see her. She was married now, and a sober careful matron, with a baby to look after. It was late, and the evening had fallen dark and chill. Genna was sitting by the fire, busy plaiting the long, pale wisps of straw that lay beside her. She looked up with some surprise at her visitor.

"Is it you, Teresina?" she said. "You are welcome. It is long since I have seen you."

"Yes; I have little enough time for a gossip with a neighbour, or a run down to the market, now," said the plump, brown-faced woman, seating herself by the fire. "But I have come up to-night to tell you some news, Genna. You never go to the

town now—you hear nothing, and this may interest you."

"What is it?" She spoke very quietly, but her thin cheek turned paler, her hands trembled a little, and the plaits of straw grew slightly uneven under the movement of those shaking fingers.

"A man has come from Rome to-day to see my people on business, and I heard what he was saying of the doings in the great city yonder. They talk of nothing else save a new artist and his painting, so Dini says. He has painted a woman. She is lovely—everyone is full of it. They flock in crowds to see the picture, and some great noble has bought it for his palace. Genna, I thought suppose it should be Nita, and the painter——"

The straw fell from Genna's hands. She turned fiercely on the woman. "Will you never be silent on that subject?" she said. "I have told you I never wish to hear her

name—most of all from lips to whom her shame is a jest and a by-word."

"Very well," said Teresina, offended at this rough reception of her news, "I will tell you no more, though the best of the tale remains. Perhaps Nita is no shame to you after all; perhaps she has done better for herself than we all believed, and is safely married, and a great lady to boot. But then you do not care. Why do I trouble to tell you anything of her?"

"Nay, dear Teresina," cried Genna, imploringly, "forgive me! I was rough and rude, but indeed it hurts me that tongues should speak lightly of Nita—my little Nita whom I nursed from her babyhood, and loved as I have never loved another earthly thing. Oh, my dear, if your news be good, tell me—tell me. My heart is hungry for word of the child, the child whom for three long weary years I have never seen."

The intense anguish and longing in her

voice softened the offended woman. She took her seat once more.

"Well," she said, "of course it is for your sake I tried to learn as much as I could, and from what I hear it is the wife of a rich noble who is making such a sensation by her beauty, and the description of her is very like Nita."

"Well?" said Genna hurriedly.

"Does not that please you?" asked the woman in wonder. "Fancy Nita a great lady, with wealth, and honour, and jewels, and fine dresses—Nita, who used to run bare-headed through the fields, and was the wildest and sauciest girl on the whole country-side!"

"Nita, who was your friend," interrupted Genna haughtily, "and whom you were the first to speak ill of."

"It looked so bad," said Teresina, a little shamefaced at the grave rebuke. "But I should be heartily glad if this were true. Dear me; why, I should like to go to

Rome on purpose to see her. It would be so fine! Would she speak to us, think you?"

But Genna was silent. Her thoughts were busy, and full of a great wonder, an intense thankfulness. Nita's faithlessness was still an unalterable fact, but still, to know that she was safe, happy, honoured —that was indeed comfort.

Seeing how quiet and absorbed she was, Teresina soon rose and took leave of her. Genna was ever a dull companion—that she knew of old—so she went away to her own home, and relieved her mind by incessant chatter to her patient husband as she gave him his supper.

Meanwhile Genna sat on by the fire-light, her straw-plaiting forgotten, her busy hands idle for once. "It is no better, after all," she said at last. "Poor or forsaken, she would have come back to me; great, rich, honoured, she will forget. It is as if she were dead!"

Yet those few words of Teresina's haunted her the long night through. "To go to Rome—to see her—to know if this were true?"

With bent head, with tight-clasped fingers, with bated breath—so she sat and thought—thought, while old memories returned, while her patient eyes grew dim with the slow tears that filled them, and rolled down her worn, thin cheeks.

As the hours passed, and the night deepened, so did a resolve that those careless words had first awakened in her mind. She looked at the old, familiar, quiet place, round which the fibres of her heart had twined themselves, making every homely article—from the wooden settle where her mother had been wont to sit, to the copper pans, whose brightness was so dear to her housewifely eyes—all precious and dear alike.

"I must go to Rome," she said, and sighed unconsciously as she said it. The

idea was terrible, yet not so terrible as it had seemed once. Her affections were rooted in the home of her birth, but yet a great longing to gaze once more upon her sister's face took possession of her. She must tear herself away, and then——

"I will not stay. I will return," she said, half aloud, as though in explanation of her resolve, as her gaze dwelt yearningly, tenderly, on every one of the familiar and inanimate objects around; and yet, even while she made the promise, a dim foreboding crept into her heart—a fear that she could not and dared not analyse.

In the morning she gave the place into the charge of the peasant who worked in the farm now, and bade him bring his wife, and stay in the house during her absence. Then, without a word to anyone else, she set out for Rome.

CHAPTER VII.

TO ROME!

A worthless woman! mere cold clay,
As all false things are! but so fair
She takes the breath of men away
Who gaze upon her unaware.

MRS. E. B. BROWNING:
Bianca among the Nightingales.

SHE turned her back on her old home, and went down the steep sloping hillside, and so lost sight of her birthplace ere noon.

She felt strange, confused, bewildered. She had never before been in a railway, and it seemed to her simple mind a terrible and unnatural thing—this creature with its panting breath, its trail of smoke and flame, its fearful speed, that bore her along, where, she did not know. She crossed herself

many times, and prayed often under her breath for the saints' protection in this hour of terror, while the unknown force to which she had trusted herself rushed on through the golden sunshine, and rocked, and trembled, and rattled and flew, with its white steam and rain of sparks drifting even close to the wooden window by which she sat.

At nightfall she reached Rome, and dazed and worn out from the cold, and long fasting, and terror of her journey, she stumbled out of the terminus, and so found herself in the streets of the Great City.

She stared about her as she went. It was already quite dark, and the streets were very lonely and ill-lit, as Rome is at all times, and she made her way along slowly and uncertainly through the gloom that reigned around. Now and then loomed out some great thing from the darkness—a colossal statue, a huge column, a broken pillar, gleaming white in the pale misty

moonlight; a fountain throwing up its silver foam, a ruined arch, with ivy wreathing it, and wild grasses at its base. All these stole out here and there from the denseness of shadows, and moved her with a vague fear, as if she trod in some city of the dead.

Suddenly before her she saw a sight that held her breathless. It seemed as if she looked upon a way of fire, or as if the whole earth burned with a myriad flaming flowers, that had sprung suddenly from the darkness. A river of light glowed before her; domes, cupolas, streets, houses, all were bathed in its radiance, and ablaze with its golden splendour.

She stood aghast, doubting her own sight, marvelling whether she did not dream.

She did not know it was the *mocoletti* of the Carnival at which she gazed. In her own province it was altogether unknown, and she had never heard of it at all; and this torrent of light and mad uproar of

people deafened and terrified her, and held her there motionless in her horror and her dread.

She turned away at last, and ran swiftly down some quiet side-street, thinking it led away from the tumult. She soon found herself mistaken. A crowd seemed to spring up on all sides—before, behind, around her. She was wedged in by a multitude from whom escape was impossible. They bore her along by the force of their own movement, past frightened horses and fantastic cars, and throngs of masquers, all with flaming tapers in their hands, each one bent on extinguishing his neighbour's and preserving his own alight.

Crushed and breathless, she at last found a moment's cessation of that onward progress, and taking advantage of it, she clung to a doorway near by, the arch of which gave her temporary shelter. There she stood, trembling like a frightened hare as she watched the heaving, pushing crowd surge

by, while the whole air seemed alive with this luminous fantastic war of flames.

As she waited, shrinking back as far as possible for fear of again being caught by that seething mass, her eyes wandered to a window opposite, beneath which a wide gallery had been erected. It was draped with crimson and gold, and cushioned seats were placed on it; and there before her, resting her arms on the balustrade, and laughing like a child in her glee at the sight before her, was a woman so beautiful that Genna involuntarily started as her eyes rested on her. Was it—could it be Nita?

She gazed on—doubting, marvelling, both in one. The lovely face, the pouting, child-like lips, the exquisite grace of the figure, the great lustrous laughing eyes, all were the same, and yet so different. Robes of velvet and satin enfolded her, jewels flashed in her beautiful hair, and drooped like sparks of flame from her tiny ears. Yes—it was Nita beyond doubt. The eye of love

could not be deceived. A great wave of thankfulness swept over Genna's heart. Then her eyes roved over the many figures surrounding her sister, searching for that one face she longed, yet dreaded to see. He was not there.

"She looks happy," sighed Genna softly. "How rich she must be! And she looks more beautiful than ever!"

The river of fire ran by unheeded now. Chance had brought her to this place and supplied her with the very evidence she had so longed to obtain. "I will but see her for a few moments," thought the girl, in her loving, yearning heart. "My little Nita who is now so beautiful and great! Does she ever think of me, I wonder?"

The city, the crowds, the strange sights, all faded from her sight. She only saw Nita. With the first cessation of the tumult she sped across the street that divided them and entered the house. A servant stopped her, and demanded her errand. Then for

the first time Genna remembered how little she knew. She could not even say what was her sister's name. In her strange peasant dialect she tried to explain that she wanted speech with the lady on the balcony.

"What lady?" asked the man.

Genna described her.

"I doubt if she can see you at this hour. What is your business?" he demanded.

"It is with your mistress, not you!" said Genna curtly.

He looked surprised, then moved away. "What name am I to say if my lady asks?" he said, turning round as he reached the door.

Genna hesitated. "Say a friend from Giovoli," she said at last.

Ere long the man returned and bade her follow him. He led the way up a marble staircase, past chambers rich with sculptures, through long corridors and lighted rooms bright with silver and crystal, and perfumed with fragrant scents and glowing flowers. Everywhere was the evidence of wealth—

everywhere the signs of luxury and splendour. He stopped at last in a small dainty room, where a scented wood-fire burnt, and bade her wait there. Genna stood and gazed around her, stupefied with so much magnificence and beauty; marvelling how ever it had chanced that Nita was possessor of it all.

The soft sound of a closing door roused her at last. She turned.

Nita stood before her, a haughty challenge in her eyes, a cold smile on her lips, her whole aspect changed from what Genna had remembered it of old, and expected to find again.

"Nita!" cried her sister, her arms outstretched in greeting, her whole face glowing with love. Then she stopped. Her arms fell at her side; the smile died off her lips; her eyes grew bewildered and incredulous in their loving anxious gaze!

"What do you want with me?" asked Nita coldly.

For an instant Genna could find no words to answer a greeting so unexpected and so cold. Then suddenly her face flushed, she drew herself up as proudly and calmly as her sister herself. "Is that all your welcome?" she said. "Have you forgotten amidst your splendour that you have a sister still?"

Nita's lip curled scornfully. "I do not wish to recall the past," she answered coolly. "I am very different now."

"So I see," said Genna; "so different that old ties, and old memories, and old love are alike undesirable remembrances."

"How did you find me out?" questioned Nita sulkily.

"I saw you in the balcony—yonder; I was among the crowd."

"And what can have brought you here—to Rome?" demanded Nita in wonder.

A curious smile hovered round her sister's patient lips. "I daresay you are surprised," she said. "It was such a very

simple thing too; merely the fact that I could not teach my memory to serve me as yours has been taught to serve you."

Nita looked slightly abashed. "You were always so foolish, Genna," she said petulantly. "You could not surely have come all this way only to see me——"

"I did."

"And—when—I mean, what do you intend to do, now you are here?" And Nita looked doubtfully at the shabby garments and coarse figure before her.

Genna flushed with momentary shame. Not for herself, but for the shallower nature that had so quickly learned the world's first lessons, and measured even affection by appearance. "It need not trouble you," she said coldly. "I go back at once. I—I am glad all is well with you. There is no need to ask if you are happy—and your husband—is good to you, no doubt."

"My husband!" Nita's lips curled

superciliously. "He is my slave; adores, idolises, worships me. I have not done so badly for myself you see, Genna, after all. I told you that I had ideas far beyond the life I led—the life you would have condemned me to, even now, had I been foolish enough to stay with you."

"At least, you might have told me you were going away," said Genna rebukingly —pained and hurt by the coldness and selfishness of this girl, who held in such little worth the fidelity and love of long years and patient service, "not stolen away and left us all to imagine——"

"What?"

"The worst that can be imagined of any girl who deceives those who love and trust her as we loved and trusted you, Nita. But there, I did not come to reproach you. I am glad you are happy, and that Rufo is so successful. He must be great and rich both to surround you with luxury like this."

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed

Nita in astonishment. "My husband's name is not Rufo."

"Not Rufo? Not the painter with whom you fled from Giovoli?" and Genna's voice grew stern, and her face dark with anger. "Then what are you, Nita?"

"I am the wife of a noble," answered the girl, tossing her head in the old, proud, wilful way. "You surely were not such a simpleton as to imagine I would marry a poor painter; and as for Rufo Anio—I hate him!"

So vindictively and furiously were the words spoken, that Genna looked at her in horror and amazement.

"I tell you I hate him!" persisted Nita, stamping her foot with anger. "Don't look at me like that. I mean it every word! He was your lover, was he not? Ha! ha! a fine taste, truly, to prefer you and slight me. But I swore vengeance, and I have had it. It is true," she went on with greater fury, as the amazement and scorn in her sister's eyes

stung her with their unuttered rebuke, "he amused himself with me, but it was you for whom he cared—I knew it. He told me so that evening—the last I was at home, when I met him on the hillside; and I said you were about to be wedded, and that you did not like him. It was fun to see how angry he was, and how I showed him that all his airs and graces were as nothing in your sight in comparison with the honest worth of a plodding *contadino*. He said he would go at once—and I promised him that I would sit to him in Florence for the remaining portion of the picture. I told him I had friends there. The truth is I had made up my mind to leave home. I was sick of it, and I knew I could gain a living by sitting as a model to the painters, and——"

"Oh, hush!" The shamed, agonised entreaty fell across the girl's heartless words with a reproach and an agony that silenced her. She saw Genna had thrown herself down on one of the satin couches

—her whole frame convulsed with sobs—her face hidden in the poor, coarse, work-hardened hands.

Nita looked at her in silence for a moment. "You should not have come to see me," she said. "You look at things so differently. You always did."

Genna rose to her feet, and dashed the tears from her eyes. "We do look at things in a different light," she said. "I thank God for it now. I may be poor, and coarse, and ignorant, but at best my lips have never lied—my hands have never been soiled by a touch that would bring dishonour. Oh Nita, almost I wish you had died ere I had seen you as I see you to-day! I remember you a little, laughing, toddling child, coming to me for every want, looking to me for every joy. I remember you a happy beautiful maiden, the delight and pride of my heart. I have thought of you always, day and night, since you forsook me. I have

thought you might be in trouble, need, want, and that you would surely turn to me and remember me then; for if you were lonely and sorrowful you would know I at least would welcome, shelter, love you as ever. But I find you—ah, God!" The words broke off in a tearless, choking sob.

Nita only surveyed her with utter contempt. "Poor—lonely—sorrowful!" she repeated. "Did you know me so little? Did you suppose I knew my own value no better than that? I had not been two months in Florence before I was the rage there. Then Rufo sought me—poor fool! He bade me remember my promise. He could not complete his picture unless I sat to him. The sketch he took of me I had obtained long since, and refused to give it him. I sat again. I had my reasons for doing so. I knew he wanted his picture sent to Rome by a certain time. There was to be an exhibition of paintings there,

I believe. Well, it was all completed. He seemed satisfied, and a few judges and artists who came to see it declared it perfect. The night before it was to go Rufo was out spending the evening with some friends, and inadvertently left the key in the door of his studio. During his absence some one, actuated no doubt by jealousy of his dawning success, entered the room, and taking a brush and colours from the stand where he had thrown them, added some finishing touches to the painting with such good effect that——"

"Nita, you do not mean—you were never so base—so wicked?" cried Genna, in an agony of fear and horror.

The girl raised her eyebrows in affected surprise. "I?" she said coolly. "Oh dear me, no! I am no artist. Pray do not give me the honour of having completed your quondam lover's masterpiece—completed it so successfully, too, that it was not sent to Rome after all, doubtless being too perfect."

Genna drew a long deep breath, and looked at her in silence. Speech utterly failed her. Almost she doubted her own senses as she listened to the heartless words.

"That is all I know of Rufo," continued Nita. "I believe he has never painted since. He has lost all heart, they say, in his work, and is poor and ill, and almost starving."

"Oh, peace! peace! for God's sake!" implored Genna, with a piteous entreaty that might have moved any heart less callous and selfish than Nita's. "Do not make yourself utterly vile in my sight! What have I ever done to you that you should torture me thus?"

For one moment Nita paused, a faint shadow of regret softened her face, then as suddenly she mastered herself, and spoke in the old, cold, insolent way once more. "I do not see in what way I am vile, as you call it," she said. "If I have attained my ends by crooked means, yet still it is better

to attain than to miss them. I wanted to be rich and great. I am both."

"And happy?"

She coloured slightly. "Happy enough," she answered at last.

"How did you meet your husband?" asked Genna sternly.

"I did not meet him—he sought me. A great painter here painted me as Phryne. He saw it. I told you he was an Italian noble; he is old—seventy years and more—and he was mad for me. I would listen to nothing; at last he offered to make me his wife—I consented to that. Have I not done well?"

"Was the painter not Rufo?" asked Genna, turning her eyes from the radiant, triumphant face, that now bore for her a shame so intolerable—a story so sad.

"Rufo! how you do harp on that name. No! It was a great painter who promised me gold and fame if I would

but let him put me on his canvas. He was right—I have won both!"

Genna looked coldly at her. "You can boast of your shame," she said. "Did you never think of his sufferings —of mine?"

"I did not forget you," she said; "but for him—I told you—I hate him."

"What has he done that you should do so?" asked Genna as she paused.

"Done!" cried Nita, contemptuously. "Nothing! But I wanted to show him I was not the fool he imagined—not to be taken up and cast down at his caprice —no."

"And for that you have wrecked his life!"

Nita flushed hotly at the words. "No!" she said fiercely, "not for that, but because him alone of all men I loved— and he despised me."

Genna stood there quite quiet. Her face was white and still, her hands were

cold as ice, her bosom rose and fell with the slow, painful breath that forced itself through her lips. "It is of no use to rebuke or reproach you," she said. "I have loved you—cared for you. But I am sorry I sought you here. You have given me my reward. Farewell."

"You are jealous of my good fortune, I see," scoffed Nita, as she saw the proud erect figure moving to the door with a dignity of fearlessness that gave it grace beyond her own. "Of course you envy me—it is but natural."

At those words Genna turned. "Envy you? I pity you with all my heart, as I never pitied mortal in all this wide earth!"

And with no further look or word she left her.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUFO.

Oh! couldst thou but know
With what a deep devotedness of woe
I wept thy absence, o'er and o'er again;
Thinking of thee, still thee, till thought grew pain,
And memory, like a drop that night and day
Falls cold and ceaseless, wore my heart away.
MOORE: *Lalla Rookh.*

GENNA went out of the house and through the now quiet streets with the flagging feeble steps of a sleep-walker.

Her whole nature was in a tumult. Rage, sorrow, misery, shame, held her and moved her by turns. The words she had heard were burnt into her brain as by a brand of fire. They tortured her unceasingly, even

though with their memory came back the knowledge that after all she had won the lover she had so long deemed faithless; he had been true, and yet they were utterly parted—utterly lost to each other now.

She was white, and sick with horror, as she remembered her sister's words. That he had been the victim of an outrage so cruel, a wrong so great, almost turned her long-suffering love to hatred. Nita had done it—no other—and all for a purpose so base—a revenge so unspeakably mean and despicable.

She wandered on, neither caring nor knowing whither she went, in her blindness and misery. A little child stumbled against her in a narrow street, and looked up half affrighted at the white face and wide blank eyes, that seemed as if they had no sight or knowledge of aught around. "There is no one in the house, yonder," he said. "I am frightened; there is a man ill there —dying—and I am all alone. They went to

the Carnival, and bade me stay with him; but he gets worse every hour. Will you come and see? I am frightened, I tell you, and he calls always for someone who never comes."

She stopped and looked at him, not half comprehending his words, and yet moved by the entreaty that spoke in his accents. "Where is it?" she asked.

He pointed to a street opposite; it was narrow, dark, dreary-looking; but she had no fear or suspicion, and simply took his hand and went with him in silence. He talked on eagerly, telling her of how the stranger came to them a few weeks before, and how he had fallen ill and could do no work, and they were too poor to help him, and so he grew worse and worse, and to-night seemed as if almost dead, and there was no one in the house but himself, for all had gone to the last night of the Carnival, and he had been asked to go also, but did not like to leave the stranger alone; he

had been kind to him once, and it seemed a shame to leave him dying, and no one at hand to give him even a draught of water did he need it.

Ere the story was finished they stopped before a broken stairway in the side of a dreary tumbledown-looking house that seemed too ruined for habitation. "Is it here?" asked Genna, in wonder, as her guide paused.

"Yes," the child answered, and ran lightly on before her and led the way. She followed mechanically, scarcely knowing what she did in the misery that held and the pain that stupefied her.

He pushed open a door—beyond it was a square dingy room, made more dingy and desolate by the dull yellow glare of an oil lamp that was its only light. It seemed to hold but two things—a narrow pallet in the farthest corner and two wooden trestles close to the window, on which a canvas was outstretched. At sight of that

Genna started and grew deadly pale. Her eyes turned eagerly to the motionless figure —a hope that was half dread, half joy, swept over her heart, and held her for a moment spell-bound. Then she crossed the room and seized the lamp, and held it close to his face, while the sickly glare lit up the senseless eyes, the hard sharp outlines of the fleshless limbs, the hollow cheeks, the changed and stricken beauty of the man whom she had last seen on the hill-side slopes of Giovoli.

She knew him at once. No change, however ghastly, could deceive eyes so fond —a love so true as hers. She knew him, and, knowing him, fell down on her knees at his side, her heart beating with the wild music of recovered joy, her great dread silenced by her greater passion. She crouched there, scarce daring to breathe, while the lamp's dying rays struggled amidst the gloom, and the pale sickly light of dawn gleamed through the unshuttered

windows. She touched his hand—it was cold as death. She glanced round, there was no fire in the empty stove, the window-panes were broken, and the cold evening air swept in and chilled even her strong frame as she knelt there. She glanced at the child.

"Go and fetch some charcoal and wood," she said hurriedly; "and see, here is money, buy wine and bread too. Make what haste you can for pity's sake."

"I will be as quick as a bird," he said eagerly, and flew down the broken jagged stairs and out into the street, while she knelt there alone, chafing his hands between her warm rough palms, murmuring incoherent tender words born of the great love her heart had so long held, her great joy that she had found him, even thus.

When the child returned she lit the fire and warmed some wine, and gently tried to force a few drops between his clenched teeth. At first he could not swallow, but

her patience brought success. Every half-hour she gave him a little. She drew off her own warm woollen petticoat and covered his frozen limbs. She watched him with untiring patience all through the long, silent hours, during which the mute suffering of stupor was broken only by incoherent speech.

He was very ill; dying of starvation, misery, cold—here, in a great and populous city; here, where the gold that her sister squandered on a toy to amuse, a jewel to adorn her, would have bought him life and health.

The girl's heart ached with her burden of suffering. She was poor herself—the money she had was little more than she needed for her journey home, and already the half of it had gone in order that he might have food and warmth. She watched him, feeling utterly helpless herself, knowing that the man she loved lay beside her, dying slowly and surely, and she was powerless

to aid him, though she would have yielded her life for his.

The night went by. An old crone looked in once and asked her if she was a friend of his.

"He has not been here long," she said. "I think myself he was mad. I have seen him sit for hours there before that great canvas, muttering ever and anon, doing nothing ever; and then when his money failed and he grew ill and weak, there he lay as you see him now. I have done what I could, though many would not have given him house-room, seeing he had fever, and was poorer even than I, and can never give me a copper coin in payment."

"You were very good," murmured Genna. "The Madonna will bless you for your charity."

"Good!" said the woman. "No, not that. I was tempted often to turn him out, or leave him to end his life there. It must come to that ere long, but somehow

I had not the heart to do it. It cannot last much longer, though—he will die very soon."

"Oh, hush!" wailed Genna, as she threw herself beside the stricken figure and held the cold, thin hands to her warm, beating heart.

The woman nodded slowly and went away, closing the door and muttering to herself:

"A sweetheart, no doubt. Well, I hope she has something with which to pay me. She looks well off, at all events. But she is foolish to waste money on one as good as dead. Better bestow it upon the living."

The long slow day rolled on. Genna never left her post. Towards evening he grew quieter. The incoherent words no longer followed each other in monotonous sentences. He fell asleep, and slept a deep, dreamless slumber that was good to see—that made the patient watcher's heart beat

high, and filled her with rapturous thanksgiving as hour after hour passed on, and his breath grew easier, and his limbs lost their deadly coldness.

Then only she left his side and crossed over to the window and gazed eagerly at the great picture stretched there in the gloom and darkness of the desolate chamber. It was the painting he had spoken of.

She saw the long stretch of hills with the sunlight falling like molten gold on their crests. She saw the long procession of priests and people, and swaying censers and waving banners and singing children; then——Ah; what was this! Across the two central figures of the procession was a long black smear, which completely obliterated their faces.

She knew in a moment what it was. Nita had spoilt her own likeness and Genna's at the very moment when the picture was completed—at the very moment when the artist's hopes were highest, and

his dreams of success seemed about to become certainty.

She shuddered as she gazed.

"Oh, how could she do it?" she moaned. "How could she?"

The tears rose to her eyes as she gazed, dimming her sight, blinding her to the colours and figures before her. She knew of the long hours, the wasted labour represented here, and all was marred and ruined by a woman's cruel malice. All this magnificence of thought, this glow of colour, this glory where imagination and realism were blended together—all were wrecked, totally and for ever, by a hand ruthless and unsparing—as only a jealous, unscrupulous woman's hand could have been.

"And she was the child I loved," murmured Genna, and then turned away, too sick at heart, too full of wonder in the bewildered anguish of her aching brain, for any thought to comfort her now.

A faint voice stole to her ear as she stood

there. She started, and looked towards the bed. He was sitting up, his eyes fixed on her face in a wonder that seemed incredulous—in a joy that thrilled her with its own rapture of recognition and delight. A scarlet flush burnt her cheek. She trembled in every limb, then passed swiftly across the space between them, and threw herself at his side.

"Genna!" he said, so faintly that ears less keen than love had made hers could not have caught the word; "Genna, is it you?"

She could not speak, she only caught his hands and bathed them with her grateful tears, and kissed them with her trembling lips, and quivered there before him with an exceeding joy that almost terrified herself. "It must be you," he went on, dreamily. "Who else? You were my good angel once, Genna. You are by my side again. You will make death easy for me, dear, will you not?"

Her sobs choked her. Speech failed; she

could only answer him by a pressure of the feeble hands that clung so fondly to her own.

He sank back on his pillow, exhausted by those few words. The sight of his weakness recalled her to herself. She started up and brought him warm wine, and soaked bread in it, and held it to his lips, and saw him take the welcome nourishment, with a gladness and relief beyond all words. He looked up at her gratefully. "How good you are!" he said; "but you were always good. How did you come here? Have you heard? Do you know?"

"Yes," she said, softly, "I know all. Do not trouble to think of it. I will nurse you back to health, and when you are well and strong——"

He laid his hand on her lips. "Do not deceive yourself, dear," he said; "I shall never be well and strong again. My life is over. I am only sorry that it bears no record on its pages for the world to read.

save failure." Her tears fell fast and thick. She could not speak a denial of his words, for her heart told her only too well how terribly near the truth they were. She was silent in the breathless hush of an unspeakable awe; her heart stood still, as if some cold hand had seized and chilled all its warmth and life. "Tell me," he said again, in feeble broken accents, "are you wedded? Was it true what *she* said?"

"No," she answered, while her face flushed with shame for the falsity of her sister, and then grew pale beneath his longing gaze, that was at once so sad, and tender, and earnest.

"It is too late now," he said, with slow and painful effort. "That denial would have gladdened me once—would have given me hope and energy, but now——"

"Do not despair," she entreated, kneeling there and clasping his hands as they

moved restlessly to and fro. "God is good — there is still hope — you may recover."

A wan pitiful smile crossed his lips. His eyes turned to the painting on the easel by the window; turned sadly, caressingly, as though the lifeless things of his own creation were still dear above all else.

"I was so proud of it," he said simply. "I spent all my thoughts, hopes, time, in perfecting and creating it, and then, at the very moment of success, I found it—so!"

She followed his gaze to the painted daub that had ruthlessly destroyed all the beauty and completeness of his brush, and shuddered as she looked.

"It was my death-blow," he said sadly, while the slow hot tears rolled down his sunken cheeks. "Somehow I never had the heart to work again. It was weak, foolish of me—I know it—but I could not help it. My heart died then—with *that!*"

Sobs were her only answer. "Perhaps it is best so, after all," he said, at length. "I am glad to see you once more, Genna; glad, even though I think of the wasted years that might have been so happy for us—had I been more trustful, for you do care for me a little, Genna, do you not?"

"Oh my love! my dear!" she sobbed in her great anguish; "more than for life, more than for anything on the whole wide earth!"

His eyes turned on her with a gladness beyond all words. He stretched out his weak arms towards her. "Kiss me dear," he murmured faintly. "See, I am too weak even to touch your lips."

She stooped down, her face radiant with the great pure love that thrilled her heart now. Her arms stole about his throat, her lips sought his. "Live, oh live!" she cried. "Live for me, my love! my love!"

He sighed like a tired child, while, with his head on her breast and her lips upon his own, he rested in the sweetness of a great content.

Then suddenly she felt his lips grow cold—his eyes closed—he trembled and was still.

Her lover had passed from her arms to the arms of death!

She rose and staggered to her feet, while that cold still form lay there on the narrow bed. Her brain seemed on fire; her lips moved without sound. Her life seemed over. Her eyes turned wistfully to the marble face that looked so calm and peaceful now. Slowly she covered the wasted limbs; softly she stroked the dark rich curls from his brow; then bent and kissed the closed lids, the mute cold lips, that no caress could warm to life or love again.

She did not weep now. She could not. A stone seemed in her breast instead of the

beating heart that had throbbed with the rapture of love but a few brief moments before. She covered his face and left him.

"Is he dead?" asked the child wistfully, as he met her on the stairs.

She bowed her head and passed on.

"Is he dead? Have you money to pay for decent burial?" said the old wrinkled crone who lived in the house and let the rooms to tenants poor and wretched as herself.

Genna's hand sought for the few remaining coins that were still in her possession. "Is that enough?" she asked.

"Enough? No!" exclaimed the woman scornfully. "But no matter, the students will give me a silver coin for that corpse of his. He was a handsome youth when he came here first."

The girl shivered at the horrible words. "For God's sake spare him that indignity!" she cried. "His life has been one long sorrow; let him rest in peace now!"

"He shall, if you give me the money."

Her hand went to the necklet of pearls around her throat. It was her one ornament. It had been her mother's and her grandmother's, and then left to her as a precious and valuable legacy, yet at this moment she had no thought of these things. She drew it off and handed it to the woman. "It is of value," she said simply. "Do what is necessary. Promise me you will keep faith if I trust your word."

The woman looked at the simple noble face with involuntary reverence.

"I promise," she said, "as I hope for salvation myself. But you—will you not wait? Will you not see the last?"

She shuddered. "No, I cannot. For me the last is over!"

And she went swiftly, blindly on through the darkness, while the chill winds blew back her heavy dusky hair, and the rain beat down on her white and bloodless face and her uncovered head.

"He loved me!" she said, again and again, in her heart. "He loved me—at last!"

But the wind only moaned, and the rain only fell on her, and in the sigh of the one, the tears of the other, she heard but the burden of her own future life through the weary years that were to follow:

"All good things come—TOO LATE!"

A COSTLY MASK

A COSTLY MASK.

CHAPTER I.

"But in your bitter world," she said,
"Face-joys a costly mask to wear."
E. B. Browning.

"Yes, Lady Leintwardine is undoubtedly a happy woman—one to be envied!"

I turned and looked at the speaker as I caught these words, uttered amidst the glitter and whirl of a crowded ball-room. I saw a tall fair man leaning against the curtained window a few paces from where I stood. His eyes were resting on a woman at the farther end of the long suite of rooms, now thronged with all the beauty and fashion of the county around Leintwardine Court.

The words were spoken carelessly enough,

but to me they conveyed a deeper import and a sadder meaning than the speaker imagined. I followed his eyes with a sudden pain at my heart, a foreboding that I could not account for then. He was gazing intently at the beautiful woman whose name he had uttered—a woman on whom many eyes besides his own rested in admiration that night, as she stood with that imperial dignity and grace so peculiarly her own, amidst the brilliant circle of her guests.

"I am very tired," I said to my partner. "I must sit down for a few moments."

Then I sank down upon the one vacant seat near that curtained recess, and begged him to finish the dance with someone else instead of waiting beside me.

I dare say he thought my conduct strange, but I did not care; I had but one thought at that moment—to find out how this man, whose presence had for me such painful memories, was here to-night—here

in the presence and as the guest of the very last woman in the world he should have dared to meet. He did not seem to see me. His companion, a slight dark military-looking man, spoke to him now and then; but his answers were very impatient, and his eyes never relaxed from that vigilant gaze on the face and form before whose matchless beauty and perfect grace all other loveliness paled.

"Happy," he had said—"a happy woman—one to be envied!" I smiled bitterly as I thought of those words.

She was beautiful, rich, courted, beloved; but, ah, not happy! With all the wide meaning that that misapplied word possesses, no wider ever existed than the one it bore for her. I knew that well. I at least, of all who loved her, could read the proud calm face as no other could; for I alone held the key to her past, and by it had learnt this fear for her future.

"How could he think her happy?" I

said angrily to myself. "Has he forgotten —or is it that she plays her part too perfectly for detection—even such sharp and keen detection as his?"

As the thought passed through my mind, he turned and saw me. The handsome face grew slightly pale. Then he bowed, advanced, and stood before me.

"This is indeed a surprise, Miss Davenant," he said. I had no idea, when I came here with my brother-officers to-night, that I should find myself among old friends."

"And I am sure Lady Leintwardine will be no less surprised than myself at meeting you as a guest under her roof, Captain d'Eyncourt."

"I was not aware—I had not heard that Miss Langdon had married."

"No?" I said, in affected surprise. "She married a year ago. I thought every one had heard of it by this time."

"A year ago!"

The words fell from his lips almost unconsciously.

Try as he would to appear unconcerned, his calmness forsook him. A sudden memory of past days, a sudden passion of remembered joys, shook him with its tempest of remembrance. He strove hard for calmness. I almost pitied him, in spite of all the dislike, pain, and bitterness his presence had brought. I looked another way. I could not bear to see the quivering lips, the trembling hands, and the sudden pallor that swept over the bronzed soldierly face. I had said many many times I hated him; but I pitied him intensely now.

Presently Captain d'Eyncourt spoke again, with the old impassive languor habitual to him.

"Is the old Rector still living?"

"No," I said.

The curt cold reply seemed to surprise him. He looked at me closely.

"You have changed very much. You

used to be so gay and cheerful. I remember I used to envy your light-heartedness in the old days."

A sudden flash of anger rose to my face.

"No one can be always gay, I suppose," I replied coldly, "unless one is utterly selfish. Even if we have no troubles of our own, we cannot but feel the shadow of others' grief and pain, if we love them at all."

"Has Clare had many?"

"I beg your pardon," I said coldly, with astonished eyes.

He bit his lip in momentary confusion.

"Habit makes me forgetful. It is so difficult to think of her by a new title. Of course I should have said 'Lady Leintwardine.'"

"I believe I heard your own lips affirm, a few moments ago, that she was a happy woman and one to be envied," I remarked sarcastically.

He started slightly.

"Yes; I was asked if she did not look so."

"And you answered rightly. I think if she were not happy she must indeed be hard to please. Few ever had so brilliant and fortunate a lot offered to them. Her husband adores her; her home is perfect; luxury, wealth, honours—all are hers. Can the heart of woman desire more?"

"Is that her husband?"

I noted the hesitation, and also the pain in his voice, as I followed his glance across the brilliant room.

"Yes," I answered.

"I fear I am detaining you from the pleasure of dancing," he said hurriedly and irrelevantly; and, with a low courteous bow, he left me.

I leant back in my seat, silent and sad. I looked tenderly and regretfully on that face we had discussed, and my thoughts went back to the time that had given her a great fierce sorrow to bear—a sorrow

whose pain shadowed her eyes and darkened her bright young life even now.

She never showed it. The outside world guessed nothing of its existence; the husband who adored her with such passionate love never suspected or perceived it. But I—I alone was not to be deceived or pacified into content; I alone knew her heart as none other knew it, because I alone loved her as none other loved. I had loved her from the time I was a tiny child, crying sadly for my dead mother's kiss, that never again would seal my lips to rest. I had loved her in my girlhood and my womanhood as I love her at this moment in my weakness and age; and my love could not judge her as the world judged, or believe of her what the world believed.

Who would have thought a care or a sorrow rested on that sunny brow? Who would have thought that the mistress of this superb mansion, standing with laughing

eyes and smiling lips beside that handsome adoring husband of hers, was yet restless, weary, bitterly unhappy? Who but I? And even I found it difficult to believe as I watched her to-night. Even I for a moment fancied her content, but——

Ah that "but"! It took me back to the memory of a summer just two short years before; it took me back to a scene I had witnessed a few nights before this, when I had seen her tear off the jewels from her breast, the silks and laces from her fair form, and crouch down at my feet in the firelight, weeping as only women weep when their hearts break over the grave of a dead love.

Knowing this and remembering this, I smiled bitterly at the superficial reading of the man beside me—the man who held the key to her past, who might wreck her future, the man whom I trembled to see here in her rooms to-night.

Did she know he was here? I wondered.

The calm unconscious face betrayed nothing. I thought I would at least prepare her—whisper just a word of the coming surprise—for fear she might betray herself to the watchful eyes around. For Lady Leintwardine was an object of much envy to her own sex and of unbounded admiration to the other.

She was so surrounded that I had considerable difficulty in getting near her; but at last I succeeded.

"You here, Beatrice!" she exclaimed, smiling as she saw me at her side. "How is it you are not dancing?"

"I—I was tired," I said hesitatingly.

"Tired so soon!" and Lady Leintwardine made room for me beside her, sweeping aside the embossed white velvet train of her dress with a careless graceful gesture.

"Have you been dancing much?" she asked again. "I hope you are enjoying your first ball, dear—you are young enough and happy enough to do so."

For how could she tell, my proud beautiful darling, that I loved her with a love that shadowed my life with her own sorrows, and gladdened it only with her own joys?

"I am enjoying it very much," I answered gaily. "I have had as many partners as I could desire, though none of them were very desirable; and I have said nearly the very same things to each, and learnt on the whole that 'waltzing is rather jolly fun, don't you know,' and that, for a provincial ball, this is really uncommonly well got up."

She smiled, the gentle shadowy smile that so seldom looked like mirth, that so often made my heart ache and my eyes dim —why, I could hardly say.

"By the way, Clare," I said presently, looking intently at the flowers in my bouquet as I spoke, "I fancy—I mean I saw an old friend of ours here to-night. I was wondering if you had invited him.

I think he came over with the officers of the Tenth. I saw him talking to Major Herbert a little while ago."

There was no answer; yet somehow, though my flowers did want so much arranging, and though my head was so far turned away contemplating their grouping, and though my hand could not fix one obstinate piece of maidenhair fern to my satisfaction, I seemed to know how pale she was, I seemed to feel the tremor of fear and expectation that shook her like a leaf at my careless words.

"Who was it?"

The words fell slowly from her lips.

"Captain d'Eyncourt. Darling, don't look like that! For mercy's sake, try to be calm! I see him coming now with your husband."

Low and hurriedly did I speak, for I was full of the nameless fear that chilled my heart as I saw those two approaching figures, and the words were forced from

me by that remembrance of the past I so well knew, and for which she alone suffered.

She neither spoke nor moved, but the blood so lately driven back by fear came flushing hotly into cheek and brow; the tremor of fear that had shaken her like a wind-tossed leaf left her calm and cold as marble.

"Clare," said her husband, as he came up to our seat, "this gentleman has come over to-night with our friends of the Tenth. Herbert brought him. He tells me you and he are not strangers; so there is no need to introduce him."

"None whatever," replied the cold chilling voice of his wife, which contrasted strangely with the hearty genial tones of Lord Leintwardine himself. "I remember Captain d'Eyncourt perfectly."

"And that Captain d'Eyncourt remembers Lady Leintwardine it is hardly necessary to say," was the courteous rejoinder, as the

handsome man bowed low before her—"though not as Lady Leintwardine."

It was cruel of him to say it—cruel indeed, because his jealous adoring eyes were fixed on the lovely flushing face, and her hard-earned composure gave way like a bow overstrung; and I knew, with a direful terror that numbed me to the core, that her husband saw and read for himself the secret he had half-suspected—the secret of the love that would never be his to gain, because it had never been his to lose.

Perhaps to other eyes there was nothing remarkable about this little group. Doubtless we only looked four well-dressed persons—three remarkably handsome ones, standing conversing, and bowing and smiling, as others around us did. But there were the elements of a life's tragedy in that circle; and the first act was being played then.

"Will you give me this waltz, Beatrice?"

said Lord Leintwardine hurriedly, as the first strains of a fresh dance sounded through the room. "I have not danced with you the whole evening."

I rose immediately. Anything was better than to sit there listening to that rich sweet voice, with its too alluring music; anything was better than to watch that strongly-repressed and terrible agitation of Clare's, betraying itself through the most careless word or gesture.

I took Lord Otho's arm, and left them together beside the flowers, where the fountains threw their silver spray to the arched roof, and the sound of the distant music came in soft subdued strains. But my heart ached for Clare with an intense pity; and a cold chill fear damped my usually gay and careless spirits, oppressing me with bitter pain that was not for myself, but for my darling, whose life and honour and happiness were a thousand times dearer to me than anything the world held.

"If only he had not come!" was the burden of my thoughts. "Was all the earth not wide enough to keep these two apart?"

CHAPTER II.

'Tis formed of pain long nourished.

"BEATRICE," said my partner sternly, as we stood resting after the waltz, "how long have you known Captain d'Eyncourt?"

"We used to know him about three years ago," I answered carelessly. "When grandpapa was alive he came very often to the Rectory. Uncle Charles used to bring him."

"Was that required?" he asked bitterly.

"Was what required?" I said in my most ingenuous manner; for the fear at my heart was growing greater now, and I dared not let him see how his questions alarmed me.

"Bringing him. I should have thought

that there were attractions enough at the Rectory to make any man go there willingly enough."

"There were, of course," I assented coolly; "but he got tired of me very soon. Somehow I could never keep my lovers long."

"And then?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, then of course he stopped away! A most natural proceeding on his part; and one which was very naturally resented on mine."

"Pshaw, child! you are fooling me unnecessarily," he said, with evident impatience. "Answer truly. Was it only you he came to see at the Rectory?"

"There were other things and—persons," I responded slowly and thoughtfully. "For instance, there were the roses, in which he took a great interest; and there was Sultan—my horse—who wanted veterinary treatment very often, and got it from Captain d'Eyncourt even oftener. There

was uncle Charles, with his last pre-Raphaelite painting, and grandpapa, with his wonderful library, and——"

"And your aunt; you forget her."

"That would be impossible," I answered promptly, looking back, even as the words left my lips, on the long sweet loving years we had spent together. "I do not forget her; but perhaps Captain d'Eyncourt did."

It was so true, so horribly true, that I wondered the jesting words conveyed no more to him than I meant. I saw the shadows leave his face; I saw the dark blue eyes lighten; and I knew that the suspicion was leaving him, even as I had longed and hoped that it would leave him.

"What bad taste on his part," he said, laughing.

"To prefer me, do you mean? So I thought, though the idea does not sound exactly complimentary, now your lips convey it."

"What a girl you are, Beatrice! Are you never serious?"

"Sometimes," I replied, with becoming gravity; "but then I have the tooth-ache."

"Shall we have another turn?" he asked, laughing the old cheery hearty laugh I loved to hear. "Conversation with you is always a match of words and wits; and I am not sure I always come off best in it."

He whirled me again into the stream of dancers; and my eyes, ever seeking restlessly for that one face I loved so dearly, saw it pale and sweet as ever in the shadowy distance, with that smile on the lips that always reminded me of those sorrowful tender words:

> "When lips can smile like mine," she said,
> "Who dreams the heart may bleed?"

And from time to time through the gay waltz-music those lines kept sounding in my ears, setting themselves to the airy measure,

echoing and re-echoing in the far-off strains with a mocking persistency.

Was it a year, or a month, or a lifetime ago I had heard someone read that tender poem to two girlish listeners—read it while the bright stars were shining overhead, and the wind was softly stirring the leaves in the lime-trees above us? What pathos, passion, and despair had been in his voice! What tears had rained from someone's eyes — unseen perhaps, but surely guessed at in the silence that followed the closing lines:

"But in your bitter world," she said,
"Face-joy's a costly mask to wear—
'Tis formed of grief long nourishèd,
And rounded to despair!

You weep for those that weep," she said.
"Oh fools, I bid you pass them by!
Go, weep for those whose hearts have bled
What time their eyes were dry.
What sadder can I say?" she said.

And this was two years ago—only two years—so short a time to measure joy—so long a space to measure pain. Only two

years, and now they met as strangers. On her hand rested the symbol of wifehood, and on his head the weight of the sin that had severed them.

I had liked Vere d'Eyncourt once; but to-night I felt that I hated him. Could I have looked a little farther into the future I might have seen what cause I had to hate him—I might have seen what a dark page was opening in the life's history of the fair woman I loved so well, the woman who had stood to me in the place of mother, sister, friends, all my life, and whom I worshipped with the idolising impulsive worship of a girl's untutored heart. I could see in her no wrong, no fault. I only knew that I loved her as I loved no earthly thing—as I thought I never could love another human being.

She had been everything to me from the time I was left a sickly orphan and borne to her home in the beautiful West of England. She was but a very few years

older than myself, and looked so girlish in her happy light-heartedness that all formal restraints of relationship soon dropped between us. We were aunt and niece, but we never seemed to remember it. To me she was like an elder sister, and I seldom called her anything but Clare. We read, studied, rode, drove, walked, and talked together; we were inseparable companions, and rarely, if ever, to be found apart.

This pleasant life lasted till I was sixteen and she was twenty; though I often used to tell her that the years and dates must be wrong, for it was I who looked the older of the two. And then a sudden change came over it all. A new element was admitted into that charmed circle which I had thought to keep unbroken; and the days when we two had been enough for each other in every pursuit and occupation were ended.

The change came gradually, but surely—

so surely that, try as I would in my jealous love to shut my eyes to the fact, I could not do it—could not believe my darling was the same bright loving Clare as of old, the light and sunshine of the house, the one radiant centre round whom our lives had revolved, and from whom their gladness had been drawn.

My uncle Charles—as I had jestingly told Lord Leintwardine—was an amateur painter of the worst style and the most praiseworthy perseverance.

How he met Captain d'Eyncourt, and for what special purpose the Captain was so often invited to the Rectory, I for a long time vainly tried to discover; but a happy accident at last revealed to me that he was acting as a model for one of the figures in the marvellous picture that was one day to glorify the Academy walls, and cause every painter to live henceforward in a state of morbid and insatiable envy towards the fortunate artist who at last

had shown his benighted fellow-creatures what art could and ought to be!

What it ought to be I could not explain, as I was lamentably conscious of my extreme ignorance on the all-important subjects of breadth, depth, background, foreground, tone, shadow, *chiaro-oscuro*, and other mysteries on which I had heard uncle Charles descant learnedly many a time, with little profit, but intense awe.

What it *could* be however seemed to my amazed eyes a fearful and wonderful thing, when I had once been favoured with a view of the pre-Raphaelitish marvel, which revealed tints more gorgeous than Nature ever produced—figures more gigantic than any knowledge of perspective allows to be possible—old armour, blue delf, and natural history strangely mixed up together; but then, as uncle Charles took pains to explain, this showed only originality of conception. Why should genius be trammelled by ordinary rules and fettered

by commonplace precedent? I therefore put down my want of appreciation to my own ignorance and stupidity.

But I must leave uncle Charles, with his good-humoured face and his incessant art-lectures and his wonderful belief in himself, and return to my beautiful, graceful, dazzling Clare—Clare as I knew her first, in her fresh young girlhood; Clare as she stands now in my sorrowful memory—on her brow the weight of heavy care—in her heart the passion and the pain that come, alas! too often to women's hearts when they love, and love unworthily.

CHAPTER III.

And rounded to despair.

Of all the faces I ever saw, the most beautiful was Clare Langdon's, with its thoughtful lustrous eyes, and hair with gleams of gold amidst its darker waves, and a smile so tender and so sad that it half gladdened and half shadowed the lovely lips, with their proud curves and passionate sweetness.

There comes back to me the memory of one summer morning just two short years ago, when I saw her standing in a flood of amber light on the lawn of our dear old home. The sunlight bathed her in a golden glory. She almost dazzled me as I looked with the lustre of her hair, the radiance of

her eyes, the glow of red roses, clusters of which filled her hands.

I stood and gazed at the beautiful picture till my eyes filled with tears. Why, I could not tell. Perhaps some dim foreboding of coming ill haunted me. I felt for the first time that her heart had opened to another love than that which had so long contented it, and with the feeling came also a fear, the shadow of which was to haunt me for many and many a weary year to come.

As I stood and watched her she turned suddenly round and saw me; then, with the roses in her hands and the glorious sunlight irradiating her sweet face, she crossed the lawn and came to my side.

"Am I late, dear? Is papa waiting for me?" she asked.

"No; he is not down yet," I answered, stretching upon tiptoe to reach the rosy lips, as sweet and red as the roses that she held. "Clare, I do believe you grow taller every day. I can hardly reach you now."

She smiled.

"You are such a little thing, Beatrice. But I think I err on the other side—I am too tall."

"Not a bit," I asserted proudly, looking with admiring eyes at the graceful figure before me—"not an inch, Clare. Who could have the bad taste to think so?"

"Not you certainly, little flatterer. But other people see me with eyes of common sense, and judge me with rational unbiassed judgment."

"Who may the other people be?" I asked.

"They are not members of my domestic circle;" and she laughed merrily. "You all combine to spoil and flatter me with the most perfect unanimity possible. If I don't grow up the vainest woman alive it's not for want of pains taken to make me so."

"No one could spoil you!" I exclaimed, looking at her with adoring eyes, for I dearly loved my beautiful aunt.

She looked down gravely and fondly at my earnest face, then stooped and kissed me.

"How you love me, Beatrice!" she sighed; then added more lightly, "Come in with me now and help arrange my roses—there is just time before breakfast."

I followed her as she turned away, and we entered the pretty breakfast-room together — the room where the scarlet blossoms of twining creepers clustered round the window, and lent their bright blush to the old gray stonework without, and the snowy curtains and dainty damask within.

My darling flitted about like a bird, arranging her roses with swift deft fingers, and brightening and beautifying everything around us as she always did. Then, all her preparations being completed, she put one lovely glowing rose in her bright hair, and, coming over to my side, fastened another in those wavy dusky locks that always looked

to me doubly hideous when her own were near.

Just as she had arranged it to her satisfaction, the door opened, and her father entered. The dear old white-haired Rector looked strangely troubled, we both thought; he carried in his hand an open letter, which he laid beside his plate.

"Is there nothing for me, papa?" asked Clare, as she kissed him softly, and brought him his coffee.

"No, my love, nothing," he said, "except a message."

"A message! From whom?"

"From your old friend Otho. His father is dead, and he has been recalled from the Continent to take possession of the estates at last."

"At last, indeed! Why we thought Lord Leintwardine was going to live to the age of Methuselah! Let me see, how old was he, papa?

"Seventy-seven, my dear — ten years older than I am."

"And does Otho seem sorry?"

"They were never good friends, you know. Otho was always so frank and generous, and his father—well, you know the proverb, '*De mortuis*,' et cætera."

"He was as great a miser as ever lived. But, dear me, papa, how rich Otho must be now he is lord of Leintwardine Court!"

"You may well say so," replied the gentle old Rector with a sigh; "one of the richest men in England now, and one of the best and noblest too."

"He was always a good fellow," said Clare patronisingly, remembering the days when the grave handsome student, who was reading with her father, had so often found time to enter into her girlish pleasures and obey her girlish commands; "very good and kind and obliging, though it seemed to me a trifle stupid."

"Clare!"

"Well, papa, you know what I mean; so shy and reserved and odd for a man, and a man of middle age, too. Why, he was quite old when he came to read with you."

"Is a man ever too old to learn, my love?"

"I suppose not; but still I never could see what he wanted to keep on coming here for all those years. I am sure he ought to have learned all that Greek and Latin and other things ages before."

"Perhaps he had, and forgotten them," I suggested.

"I was very glad to have him," said the old Rector gently, remembering how great a help had been those reading fees to his limited income, and how they had assisted his benevolent exertions in that poor and heavily burdened parish.

"Let me see his letter. What does he say to you?" inquired Clare, with the privilege of a spoilt child.

"No, no, dear; at least I mean not just yet," said the old man hesitatingly. "There are some private matters in it."

"Private matters between you and Otho? How funny!" she answered, with a puzzled look stealing over her bright face. "Is he making you father-confessor of all his delinquencies abroad? I don't envy you the ordeal." And she rose from her seat.

"Stay, Clare, my love," said her father, a little nervously it seemed to me. "I am a bad hand at keeping a secret. You may just as well know now as later. Otho wants to marry you."

"Wants to marry—me!"

A moment's hesitation, and then from the fresh-parted lips came a peal of joyous ringing laughter, which showed how heart-whole she was and how happy.

"I see nothing to laugh at, Clare," continued her father gravely. "An honest man's love is not a thing to be despised, I can tell you!"

"I don't despise it—I don't indeed," she answered, with sudden gravity. "But it seems so odd—wants to marry me! Why, what on earth put such an idea into his head?"

"You had better read his letter for yourself," said the old man, handing it to her across the table. "And, Beatrice, will you come to my study for a few moments? I want to speak to you."

"Has she had a proposal too?" laughed Clare, as he quitted the room. "Dear Beatrice, it is quite evident we are not meant to waste our sweetness on the desert air for long."

"Say rather, 'I,'" I answered her, with a smile at her gay nonsense. "No suitor is likely to appear on the scene for me to refuse or accept."

How she blushed at the words, interpreting them, as I feared she would, by the tender teachings of her own heart, by the specious whisperings of that false sweet

voice that was luring her on to ruin—even then!

I found her father sitting in the study, with a thoughtful, almost troubled, expression on his face.

"I want to consult you, my dear," he said gently, "about this matter of Otho. You have great influence with Clare, I know. Well, for my sake and hers, use that influence to further this marriage proposal. It is almost imperative she should marry; for I am an old man now, and may not have many more years to live. If I die, she is quite unprovided for. My income has never been large; and what I might have saved has been expended in charity often and often; for I could not sit down in my comfortable home and eat and drink and be content, while the poor and necessitous were starving and homeless around me."

"I know how good you always were," I said eagerly. "I——"

"Hush!" he answered gently, raising his trembling hands to stay my impulsive words. "Good? No, that is not in the power of mortals. I did but try to do my Master's work for the little while I laboured in the vineyard. But sometimes of late, Beatrice, I have heard warnings of the Messenger's approach; and now I know it is time to put my house in order ere He comes."

I was silent; but my eyes were dim and misty with the tears I could not hide; for I loved the old man who had stood in the place of a father to me for so many years, as dearly as if I had been indeed his child.

"You must not grieve," he said tenderly. "You must keep up for the sake of my child, my beautiful Clare. And that is why I tell you this, Beatrice; that is why the offer I have had for her this morning seems for her advantage in every way. Otho has loved her since

her childhood. He is so true and brave and honourable that I feel I could safely trust her happiness to him. A more suitable match it would be impossible to find, for my Clare is of good birth, and comes of a noble old ancestry; and, though she has no fortune, her beauty and grace, her goodness and virtue, would make her a fit wife for the highest in the land."

"So I think," I answered readily. "But there is one thing in this arrangement to be considered — Clare's own feelings."

"But she was always fond of Otho?"

"Oh, yes—fond of him as a sister of a brother, as a cousin of a cousin; but as a lover—no!"

"She will love him—she cannot help it. He is so handsome, so good, so noble —everything that the heart of woman could desire; and—but surely you cannot mean there is anyone else, Beatrice?"

"I fear so," I said gently.

"Who? She sees no one, and has been so exclusively at home."

"Has she seen no one—of late?"

"Only Charles's friend—that empty-headed Captain. You surely cannot suspect she cares for him! My Clare has more sense, more judgment than that."

"Captain d'Eyncourt is very fascinating," I said meekly, "and he has certainly spared no pains to win Clare's heart."

"And succeeded?"

"I fear so. I have thought it of late."

"If he were worthy of her," said the old man sadly, "if he were anything but the unstable cynical scoffer that I have found him, I should not care. Oh Beatrice, how could Clare squander that precious gift—her heart—on one so utterly unworthy?"

"I cannot tell. Maybe it is that very solitude in which she has so long lived, that made her ready to love the very first man whom she met on terms of friendship

and intimacy. I certainly cannot account for it otherwise."

"Then you think she will refuse this offer of Lord Leintwardine's?"

"I am sure of it. Did you not observe how she laughed at the very idea of marrying him? A girl who cared in the least for a man would never do that."

"I suppose not, my dear—I suppose not. But I cannot think Clare could really care for a man who had merely a handsome face and fascinating manners to recommend him. Besides, Beatrice, I always thought it was you for whom Captain d'Eyncourt cared. He always pays you far more attention than he does Clare."

I coloured faintly.

"His words for me, his eyes for her," I answered. "Who could look at me or care for me when she was by?"

"What a loyal little thing you are!" he said gently. "I do believe you think there is no one in all the world like Clare."

"I am quite sure of it," I affirmed stoutly. "I do not believe her equal ever existed."

"If I could be sure he was worthy of her!" he said after a pause.

"No man living is that," I answered sadly. "But that he loves her devotedly I am sure—all the more sure because at first he seemed trying not to care for her; but now—why, anyone can see he has no thought or look or word except for Clare."

"I never noticed it."

"No?" I said reproachfully, "I thought you must have seen! Though even if you had you could not have prevented it."

"Prevented it! Well, no, I suppose not," returned the old man, shaking his head mournfully. "Ah, well, Beatrice, if it is not to be I must submit to the disappointment! It is her welfare I was considering—her welfare, which, after all, will be in the hands of Heaven."

He bowed his head, as if in prayer for

his darling's future; and I, not wishing to disturb his solemn thoughts, rose softly from my seat and left the room.

I went to seek Clare; but in vain I looked in her accustomed haunts for the bright young presence that was so full of sunshine. She was not in her own room, though signs of recent occupation were visible there in the open work-basket, the scattered music on the piano, the book on the little table near the window, by which her chair was placed. She was not in the garden or orchard, and, tired at last of seeking for her, I threw myself down upon the lawn before the drawing-room windows, and resolved to wait for her appearance with what patience I could command.

The morning passed slowly, for I was little used to be without Clare's companionship; and at last the luncheon-hour arrived, still without any signs of my aunt.

I went slowly up-stairs into the room

we shared together, and was just smoothing my hair before the glass, when she came in.

"Why, Clare," I exclaimed, "where have you hidden yourself all the morning? I have been looking for you everywhere!"

I turned round and faced her as I spoke, and something in her aspect struck me with a chill faint fear. Her face was quite colourless, her eyes were bright, haughty, and glittering, as if some fierce and sternly-suppressed feeling had chased away their usual softness. Her ripe scarlet lips were set firmly together, her whole figure seemed quivering and trembling as from strong emotion.

For a moment I gazed at her in astonishment; but there was something in her look that seemed to forbid questioning, and that frightened and awed me strangely.

I hastily went back to the glass and

busied myself with the brushing of my refractory locks, talking all the time nervously and hurriedly, without waiting for a response from her.

She never spoke, but went up to the washstand, and commenced to bathe her face as eagerly as if its marble pallor had been the fire of fever.

How beautiful she looked as she stood there, a faint rose-colour warming her colourless cheeks, the glistening threads of hair that had caught the water curling and waving over her forehead in soft shining rings!

"Now I am better," she said abruptly. "My head ached so!"

"You have walked too far in this hot sun, perhaps," I suggested.

She laughed—a laugh so scornful and harsh, so totally different from anything I had ever heard from her lips before, that I stared at her in undisguised amazement.

"Come—are you ready? We shall be late," she said hurriedly. "I am sure papa is in the dining-room by this time."

"I am quite ready," I answered. "But just wait one moment, Clare; your dress is all over leaves and crushed flowers."

I stooped down as I spoke and began taking them out of the manifold frills and pleatings of her long white dress.

"There, it is all right now," I said, as I released it at last. "You have been sitting on the grass or sweeping all the leaves and twigs together with that train, which you never will hold up, you lazy girl!"

She stooped towards me with a quick sudden movement and seized the crushed blossoms from my hand. Then she pressed them to her lips with a wild passionate gesture, and kissed them over and over again. But even as she did so a burning flush swept over her cheeks, and her eyes flashed quick contemptuous fire.

"Oh, fool, fool!" she cried wildly. "Have I no shame, no pride even now?"

And as the words left her lips she tossed the flowers through the open window and watched them as they fell upon the gravel path below. Then, without a word or a look, she left the room, I following her in mute amazement.

When luncheon was over—and a strange unsocial meal it seemed that day—Clare rose suddenly from her seat and crossed to her father's side.

"Papa," she said calmly, "here is Otho's letter."

Her father took it from her hand in silence. His eyes rested yearningly on the beautiful flushed face and the proud sweet lips, whose pain I alone read.

"And your answer, my dear?" he asked her gently.

Her hands clasped the back of the chair on which she leaned, her cheeks paled to the hue of her snowy robe, but her voice

rang out sweet, calm, and clear, with neither tremor of pain nor sign of weakness.

"Tell him I will marry him whenever he wishes."

Had the glorious midday sun turned then to darkness, I could not have been more utterly and completely astounded than I was.

The old Rector rose from his seat and folded her to his breast.

"Thank Heaven!" he said; "thank Heaven! Oh my darling, if you only knew from what a weight of care you have relieved me!"

She released herself gently from his arms, and, kissing him softly on the brow, she left the room without a word.

Too amazed and startled to follow her, I sat still and silent in my place. The Rector's cheerful gladdened words sounded strange and far off to my ears.

"What does it mean?" I asked myself.

"What could have passed in this one short morning to change my darling's peace to pain, and win consent to such a sacrifice?"

For sacrifice of some sort I knew it was. In her voice had been no maiden coyness, in her eyes had been no loving joy. That calmness and coldness were too nearly akin to despair for any belief in their happiness, any content in their peace to rest with me.

My brain throbbed, my heart ached, and still the old man babbled on of his joy, and of his darling's goodness, and of the happy future that would so surely open out before her now; while I only listened and trembled, and was dumb.

CHAPTER IV.

"Grief's earnest makes life's play," she said.

SLOWLY and sadly as some painful dream followed the days of that miserable summer.

On the morning succeeding Clare's acceptance of Lord Otho Leintwardine's proposal came a letter of farewell to the Rector from Captain d'Eyncourt, apologising for not calling, on the plea of sudden business. which compelled him to leave immediately.

Clare heard the letter read without showing the slightest appearance of interest and without manifesting the least emotion or uttering a single remark.

The old Rector's eyes flashed triumphant

relief to mine, as if asking me to note this supreme carelessness and admire his superior knowledge of the feminine heart. "Did I not say my Clare would never throw herself away on an empty-headed coxcomb?" that look seemed to say; but I had no answering triumph with which to respond to it, for I knew that the chilling calm and stern composure of my darling's face and manner were the hard-won trophies of some inward conflict, not the natural expression of an indifference at once heart-whole and painless.

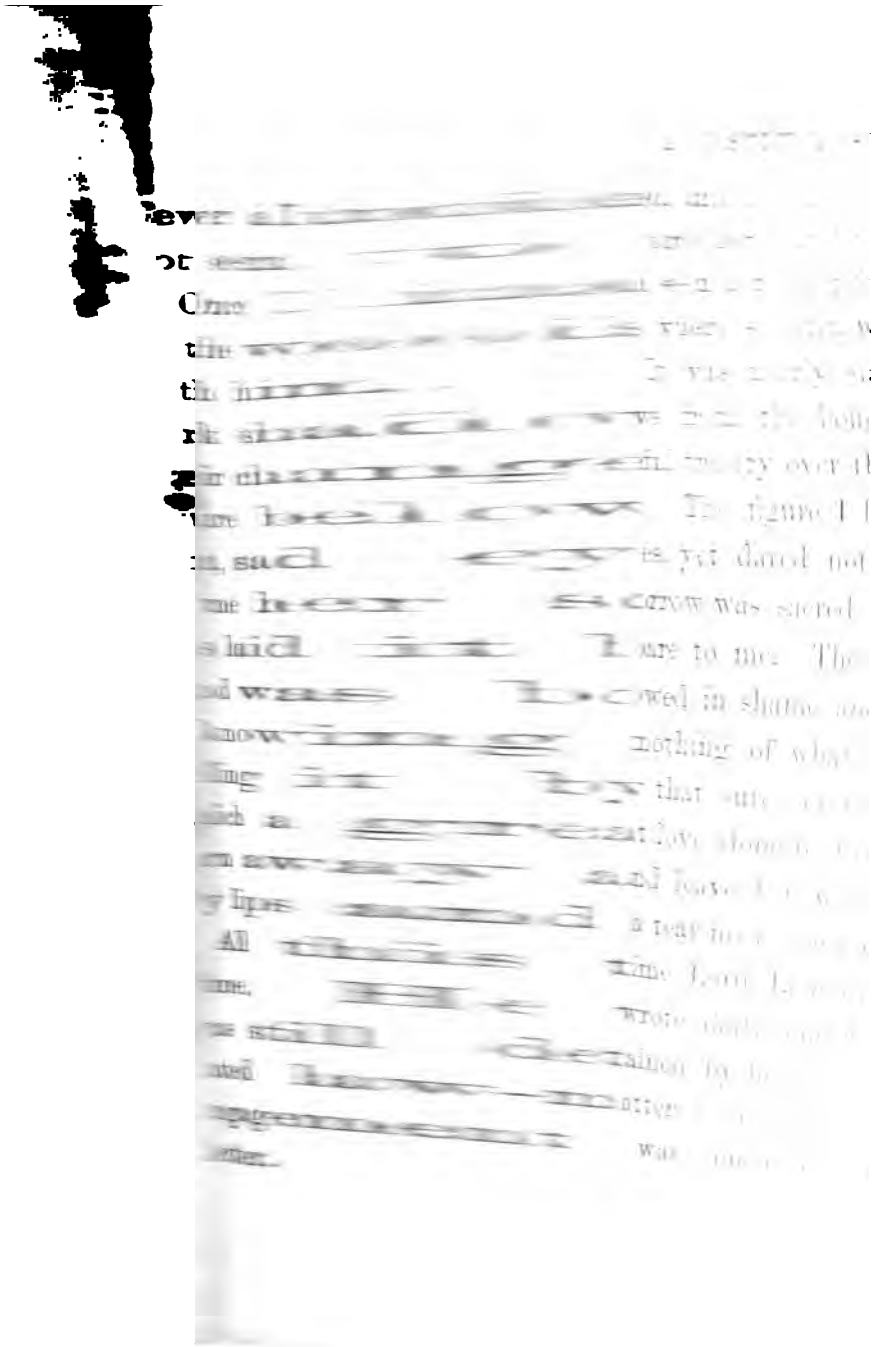
And she was so changed now! Each day she grieved and puzzled me me more and more. Each day the alternate excitement and apathy, the feverish gaiety and restless uneasiness of manner, and her entire avoidance of all confidence, grew more apparent to my loving eyes.

Of Captain d'Eyncourt she never spoke, even when I gently and cautiously mentioned him. To her own engagement she

never alluded, and I could not and would not seem to force her confidence.

Once I had seen her lying face downwards in the woods where so often we had walked with him. It was nearly sunset, and the dark shadows from the boughs fell in all their changeful tracery over that white, still figure below. The figure I looked at with dim, sad eyes, yet dared not approach, for to me her sorrow was sacred until her own lips laid it bare to me. The bright young head was bowed in shame and agony; but I, knowing nothing of what ailed her, yet feeling it by that sure sense of sympathy which a great love alone bestows, could only turn away and leave her, with a prayer on my lips and a tear-mist in my eyes.

All this time Lord Leintwardine never came. He wrote daily, and Clare said he was still detained by business and complicated law-matters; so that in fact their engagement was entirely arranged by letter.



Not that Clare betrayed any interest in it. Her coldness was terrible, I thought—terrible when I knew what depths of love her heart could hold—doubly terrible when I remembered the ardent wooer whose every word betrayed his longing to be in her presence, to hear from her own lips the tidings her hand had penned.

At last he came.

There was no shyness, no tremor of maiden bashfulness about Clare, as she prepared to meet him. She only turned listlessly to her father when she heard Lord Otho had arrived, and said quietly:

"You will come with me?"

"Certainly, my darling," he answered with ready acquiescence; and, leaning on his arm, she went to her lover's presence.

What passed between them I cannot say. Lord Leintwardine looked happy enough when I saw him at the luncheon-table. Of his pride in Clare and his love for her none could doubt who saw his adoring

glances, who heard the sweet tenderness of the rich manly voice.

No shadow of her suffering fell upon him; no knowledge or suspicion of it seemed to dwell within him. Watching him keenly and closely, I saw this; and more and more I marvelled what could have induced Clare to accept him while her heart was no longer her own to bestow, to do him so great a wrong and condemn herself to such a sorrow.

As much as it was possible for her to avoid a lover's presence she avoided his; but he was too frank and loyal of heart to wrong her by any reproach of coldness. His love had in it a reverence so deep, a trust so great, that a word or a glance contented it. His heart could hold no doubt of her. To him she was the noblest, fairest, purest among women; and, having won her promise to be his, he never doubted but that one so proud must have loved him ere giving such a promise.

He loved her with the passion of youth, the chivalry of manhood, the sweet simplicity and reverent homage of his nature; and, the more closely I observed him, and the better I knew him, the more I wondered that she could be so unmoved by such love, so untouched by such devotion.

"He loves her as no man ever loved her," I thought; and, thinking it, my heart ached for him, and for once I forgot her.

She seldom spoke to me of him while he remained with us; and I used to feel half frightened sometimes as I saw how pale, cold, and proud she looked, and listened to the change in the young sweet voice that had been so gay and glad a few short months before.

But Lord Leintwardine looked radiant with happiness, and the Rector's face beamed with content; and neither of them seemed to remark the change in Clare that to me was so painfully apparent.

There was some talk, on account of the old lord's recent death, of delaying the marriage for a year, but it was postponed only nine months at the earnest pleading of Lord Otho. As for Clare, she was simply passive, and let her father and lover arrange matters as they pleased.

Lord Otho was only two days at the Rectory; but when he left it was with a promise of speedy return—a promise that his *fiancée* certainly did not exact from him, and expressed no pleasure at receiving.

Circumstances however seemed to conspire to keep them apart. The distance between Leintwardine Court and our quiet little hamlet was very great; and matters connected with the property required his constant attention and supervision. He wrote almost daily to Clare, and she replied at intervals; but I never once heard her express a wish or desire to see him.

At last a sudden shock seemed to startle her out of her apathy and indifference.

The old Rector fell ill—not alarmingly so at first; but, as days passed on, and he grew weaker and weaker, the doctor would shake his head and speak of his age, and look graver over his want of strength. Eventually, at his urgent request, we telegraphed to Leintwardine Court for Lord Otho. He came without a day's delay; and, as I saw his shocked, pained glance at his old friend's face, I knew that, like myself, he feared the worst. At the Rector's bidding Clare and I left the room; and for half an hour Lord Otho remained there with him.

At the expiration of that time we were both summoned. Lord Otho was standing by the old man's side, and the Rector was lying back on the pillows faint and exhausted. He beckoned Clare to approach; and as she bent tenderly over him, he laid his trembling hands on her bright young head, and bade her kneel beside him.

"Clare," he said solemnly, "they tell me

my days are numbered; indeed there was little need to tell. The Master's summons came to me long since, and I trust I shall be found ready. I know it is a sorrowful thought for you, my darling; but you must remember that it is Heaven's will, and not sorrow as those who have no hope."

She burst into pitiful weeping.

"Oh papa, papa," she wailed, "do not leave me! What shall I do without you?"

"It is that I wish to speak about," he said tenderly. "Your future husband, Clare, will henceforth stand to you in place of father and friends. I leave you happy in the security of his love and honour; and I know that your life will henceforth be guarded by as tender and true a love as ever you have had from me. And now, Clare, if I have to make one last request of you — something that will make me more certain of your safety — you will not refuse it, will you?"

"Oh no, no!" she cried wildly. "Anything you wish I will do—anything!"

"It is simply to have the ceremony that will make you man and wife performed now, ere I am called away. I did so hope to marry you myself, Clare; but it cannot be—unless you will do what I wish." His voice faltered pitiably. "I wrote to Otho, and asked him to bring the new clergyman down with him in case of my getting worse. I shall not see another sunrise, Clare; but, ere I leave this world and all that is so dear to me, I want to see you his wife."

A dead silence reigned throughout the room, a silence broken only by Clare's terrible sobs and the old man's laboured breathing.

"Will you consent?" he asked her.

Lord Otho crossed to her side, and bent over the prostrate figure.

"Clare, my love," he whispered, "it is but hastening by a few months the ceremony

your father's lips cannot otherwise bless. Has that thought no comfort for you, darling—the thought that his lips will pronounce our marriage-service?"

She rose to her feet with a shudder, and brushed away her tears with a gesture of haughty disdain. All the gentleness and womanliness had left her again. She was the cold, proud Clare of the last few months once more.

"Let it be as you wish," she said.

A strange wedding truly was that—the dying clergyman propped up by pillows, the anxious grave-faced physician by his side, the pale marble-faced bride, the handsome nervous bridegroom, and I the only wedding guest. The scene in all its sad and sombre details will never leave my memory.

I see it now, even as I saw it then; but most clearly of all those figures stands out my beautiful Clare, her great sad eyes fixed on her father's face, a mute

breathless horror seeming to hold her in its grasp, her white cold lips just parted to murmur the words she was bidden to say — the words that in a few short moments made her a wife. When the ceremony was over the old man pointed to the great brown register which had been brought from the church, and bade them sign their names. Then, and then only, Clare's self-command gave way. As she took the pen in her trembling fingers and looked at the name above—the name of her husband—a deep gasping sigh burst from her lips, and she fell heavily forward, white and senseless, into the arms of the man she had wedded.

They bore her away to her own room with pitying tender care, saying softly it was little wonder she had given way under circumstances so painful. Even Lord Otho ascribed her agitation to her father's danger and her own anxiety and fear.

I do not think he even for one moment

supposed she had married him while loving another with all the strength of her young, passionate, tender heart.

That night the Rector died. All the arrangements for the funeral, the giving up of the Rectory, and the settlement of his few debts and donations, were made by Lord Leintwardine; for Clare was very ill, and totally unable to attend to anything. It touched my heart to see the devotion and tenderness of the young husband, the anxiety that tortured him, the patience and gentleness he manifested through all that trying time; and, when Clare at length recovered, he bade me tell her she should not be asked to come to her new home until she was herself willing.

She had refused to see him, even in the first days of her convalescence, and, deeply hurt and pained as he was, he still made excuses for her in his kindly way.

"Of course it will be a shock to her at first; it will bring back her sad trial so painfully," he said. "I will not force myself upon her, dearly as I long to see her. Tell her this, Beatrice. I will be patient, and wait her own time."

And, marvelling at his great unselfishness, his single-hearted fidelity, that counted its own pain as naught, if it but gave her peace, I turned away, thinking sadly to myself: "This is love indeed."

* * * * *

"Clare, Lord Otho is going. Will you not see him to say farewell?"

The beautiful girl raised herself on the pillows of her couch and looked impatiently at me.

"You know I am so ill, Beatrice, and——"

"My darling," I remonstrated gently, "he is your husband, remember! Surely he has the right to see you when others do."

She turned away.

"You are all against me," I heard her moan. "Heaven help me! How shall I bear my fate?"

"Oh Clare, Clare!" I entreated, throwing myself down by her side, vainly trying to stay the tears that rained on the slender hands I pressed to my lips. "Oh, my dear, if you would only trust me—speak to me as of old! If you would only tell me what is this terrible secret taking the gladness from your life now!"

She shuddered and drew away her hands.

"You ask impossibilities," she answered coldly. "Go, and—since my husband is so desirous to see me—bring him here."

Abashed and pained, I rose to my feet, and left the room.

"She will see you," I said to Lord Otho. "But you must be careful not to excite or fatigue her. She is still very weak."

Over his face came a very radiance of

gladness. He rose quickly, and left the room without a word.

"Heaven help them!" I murmured wearily, as I paced up and down the little parlour with restless unquiet steps. "Heaven help them! How will all this end?"

CHAPTER V.

"Ye weep for show who weep," she said;
"Ah fools! I bid you pass them by."

THAT night, when Lord Leintwardine had left us, I proceeded to Clare's room.

It was late autumn now, and the evenings were quite chilly enough for fires, even if the invalid's delicacy had not rendered them necessary. Her couch was drawn in front of the grate, and, as I sank down on my usual low seat beside it, I saw her eyes rest on my face with something of the old love and tenderness I had so long missed.

"I was cross this afternoon, dear," she said gently. "You must forgive me. I did not mean to pain you."

The tender words broke down all my

self-command. I gave way to bitter weeping. She did not speak, but let me cry on beside her till I had exhausted myself, and, feeling half ashamed of my passionate outbreak, I raised my head and looked at her.

The firelight flickered on her unbound hair as its bright masses swept over the pillows; her face was very pale, and her eyes had a look of such mute and tearless suffering that it made my heart ache to see it.

"Oh Clare," I sobbed, "how changed you are!"

"Am I?" she said gently, but so despairingly. "I think so myself sometimes. Have you found it out too?"

"Do you think me blind?" I said passionately. "Do you think I who love you cannot read your face and see more there than ever your lips betray?"

A faint flush coloured her pallid cheeks; a deeper glow burned in the dark eyes.

"I could not deceive your eyes, I know," she said softly. "Oh Beatrice, you love me far too well, believe me! If you only knew me as I am—— But there, I will not speak of it. Of what use is it to burden you with my sorrows?"

"Dear Clare," I whispered gently, "why have you so little trust in me? Once there never was the shadow of concealment between us. What have I done to forfeit your confidence? My sympathy you cannot doubt—my love you know."

"It is true."

"Then why let this terrible shadow fall on us now? It breaks my heart to see how changed and sad you are. Oh Clare, can I do nothing to help you? Is it your marriage you regret?"

"My marriage!" she said bitterly. "No. There will be one sufferer from that, I know; but it will not be myself. I would not undo it if it lay in my power at this moment. I do not regret it because it will

give me vengeance—because it will show the man who deemed he had wrecked my future that I can triumph over him still. No, I do not regret it; but Otho may—if he ever comes to know the heart of the woman he has made his wife."

For a moment I was dumb. That Clare, my gentle pure-minded Clare, should ever say such words as these seemed to me terrible. I looked at her, and then, without word or warning, I suddenly dropped upon my knees beside her couch and sobbed as if my heart were breaking.

She laid her hand on my head and tried to draw away the locked and quivering fingers from my face.

"You can cry like that?" she said. "I envy you, Beatrice. My tears are all shed now; and my heart feels like a stone in my breast. There, child, sit down in your old place, and let me try if I can tell you what I never thought

to tell anyone—how low I have fallen in my own sight!"

I obeyed her. My sobs were hushed, my tears were stayed; there was something in her voice that awed and terrified me; and, silent and motionless, I waited for her next words.

"You know—you must have known," she began hurriedly, "that Vere d'Eyncourt was not here so constantly last summer without an object. He made it plain enough to me what that object was. His looks, his words, his homage, all told the same tale, and, ere he had need to speak, he knew my heart was his.

"Oh Beatrice, how I loved him! Heaven forgive me that I say it, but I grew to look upon him as the one most perfect of created beings. I grew to think his will my law, his smiles my joy. Out of his presence I was never content—in it I was as one wild with happiness. His

power was terrible. He knew it—he must have known it—otherwise he had never dared to say what he did!"

She paused; her breathing was laboured, and her cheeks burned with a hectic flush.

"One day—you remember that day when Otho's proposal came—well, that was when I first discovered my danger. I took the letter, as you know, and with it in my hand I wandered out through the orchard-gate into the little wood beyond. I sat down and began to read. A moment later a dark shadow fell across the page. I looked up and saw him—Vere—standing there before me."

"'What are you studying so deeply?' he asked, laughing. 'A love-letter?'

"It was so nearly true, Beatrice, that I coloured and answered nervously something—I hardly knew what. Well, he threw himself down at my side and began to talk in his usual fond foolish way.

"How it came about I do not know;

but suddenly, as he sat beside me, his hands touched mine—closed on them, held them fast. Our eyes met. Another instant, and his arms held me, his kisses rained on my lips. I rested on his breast for one brief moment—frightened, bewildered, but oh Beatrice, so happy, so happy!

"'You love me. Is it not so?' he asked.

"I only raised my eyes. I did not speak—I could not. But he knew my answer well enough.

"The moments passed; if they were many or few I cannot tell. The old, old foolish story that heart tells heart and eye tells eye was repeated again and again. At last he said to me:

"'Clare, I want you to promise to say nothing of this to your father just yet; let us keep our secret to ourselves a little while longer.'

"'Why?' I asked in surprise—for to me it seemed so great and glorious a thing

that he should love me that I should have liked all the world to know of it and rejoice in my joy.

"We were standing, he with my hands in his and his eyes on my face, while I was playfully combating his arguments, when a strange rustling in the brushwood attracted my attention.

"I looked steadily in the direction whence the noise came, and as I gazed the bushes parted slowly, and standing there, surveying us, with a mocking smile on her lips and a look of fierce malicious triumph in her eyes, was a woman. I started, and Vere, following the direction of my glance, turned and saw her too.

"Oh Beatrice, shall I ever forget the horror of that moment? His face turned ashy-pale, his whole aspect was one of shame and terror. Like one spellbound, he stood and gazed at the form and face which showed through the parted brushwood.

"'*You here!*'

"That was all he said. But the change that came over his face was terrible to see as my amazed eyes turned from one to the other.

"She came forward slowly, her eyes fastened on me with a lurid light in their depths which held me like a spell.

"'Yes, I am here,' she replied, 'I have business with you.'

"'Your business was settled long ago,' he said angrily. 'What right have you to dog my steps?'

"'The greatest right of all, my dear boy,' she answered with cool familiarity—'necessity.'

"'I will see you presently,' and he spoke hurriedly. 'Leave me now; you see I am engaged.'

"Then, Beatrice, I found my voice at last. I turned to him in cold surprise.

"'Vere,' I said, 'who is this woman?'

"A harsh mocking laugh burst from her

lips, and the cool insolence of her gaze made my face flush hotly.

"'This woman,' she answered, mimicking my scornful accent to the life, 'this woman has more interest in the proceedings of your lover, young lady, than he has thought well to tell you, it seems. Pray are you aware Vere d'Eyncourt is a married man?'

"I started as if stung. My head grew dizzy, my heart sick and faint. All the bright beauty of the day turned to sudden darkness.

"His voice, stern and cold, with passion trembling in every accent, roused me at last.

"'It is a lie!' he cried. 'Oh Clare, Clare, do not listen! Let me explain all. My love, this is no scene for you. I will convince you of the falsity of this statement; only leave us now.'

"I turned and looked at him. I paid no more heed to his words than if they had never been uttered.

"'Is this your—wife?' I said.

"Before my eyes his own sank; his lips trembled, his face grew white. His own looks condemned him.

"I laughed aloud.

"'You need not trouble yourself to frame another falsehood,' I went on. 'I need no other answer to my question than the answer that your face has given.'

"Oh Beatrice, there has never been a day since that I have not lived through this terrible scene again—never a night that I have not lain awake and beheld once more that cruel beautiful face looking with mocking eyes at mine, while the sunlight shone brightly on the quivering leaves, and the birds sang loud and clear in the boughs above, and below them the happiness of a human life was mercilessly wrecked!"

Clare buried her face in her hands; and for some moments neither of us spoke. Then she drew herself up once more, and,

with her eyes still looking into the flickering firelight, she resumed her story.

"As the scorn of my words fell upon his ear he threw off the last restraint that held him speechless, and laid his hand upon my arm—for I had turned away to leave them there alone.

"'You shall not go till you have heard all,' he said in a voice of deep and concentrated anger. 'At least, do not condemn me rashly!'

"'I do not wish to hear anything,' I replied coldly, as I shook off his touch. 'What excuse can palliate the wrong you have done her? Of myself I do not speak.'

"'I have no excuse to offer,' he said humbly, 'save that I loved you.'

"All the scorn and contempt of my nature rose in answer to those words.

"'How dare you utter such an insult now?' I exclaimed. 'Do you forget in whose presence you are?'

"'No,' he cried with a fury that terrified me and held me speechless there. 'Forget! That were indeed impossible. Forget the fetters I forged in my hot rash youth to drag me down to an abyss of suffering in manhood! Forget the woman whose presence is a blight on the sunshine! Forget the fiend who tempted, wronged, betrayed me, and now claims the name she has covered with dishonour! Forget! Oh, would to heaven I only could!'

"I listened to the wild despairing words like one stunned. My heart ached for his sufferings, and throbbed with a pain far keener and crueller than his own. But no word escaped me. I stood there silent, stony, motionless.

"The woman turned her cruel glittering eyes upon me again.

"'There are two sides to every tale,' she said. 'I might tell you mine were it worth while; but it is not. The long and the short of the matter is that we were married

when your gallant Captain was just of age. He was mad for me then, even as he is for you now. We did not agree for long—our tempers, habits, ideas, were all contrary and incompatible. He was jealous, suspicious, extravagant. We agreed to separate, and separate we did—that is all. I heard of him often. I still took an interest in his welfare—you see he had loved me once. I heard he was courting again. I was afraid his memory might prove forgetful—men are not always faithful, you know. I have followed him here, and have seen you together often. I suppose you are fond of him. I was once, though I soon tired; doubtless you will too. If he wants to marry you I don't care; I am agreeable to a divorce if he makes it worth my while. That is all I have to say. Perhaps he will make you a better husband than ever he did me.'

"I had listened with shame and indignation to these rapid words. The insults

she heaped upon me fired my blood to fury. But, with a great effort, I calmed myself. I would not let her see I suffered.

"'You do me too much honour,' I said icily. 'Rest assured that any further sacrifice on your part is unnecessary. No lawful barrier could ever part Captain d'Eyncourt and myself so utterly as the mere fact of knowing he had once loved, or seemed to love, you.'

"And without another word or look I left them."

"Oh Clare, Clare," I sobbed, as her story ended, "how dreadful it all is! Oh my dear, what you must have suffered!"

She shivered from head to foot.

"Suffered!" she said, with a strange cold smile. "Ah, heaven knows I have!"

"You have never seen him since!" I asked timidly.

"Never. I hope I never may!"

"How could he have done it?" I cried. "How could he?"

"I suppose it was just as he said," she answered wearily. "This woman's beauty tempted him in his youth; he sacrificed all for her; and then, later, when we met, he forgot——or—"

Her voice broke, and a deep sigh passed her lips. The despair in her eyes almost frightened me.

"Forgot!" I cried passionately. "Ah, yes; it is always men who do that! Would to heaven that women's memories were as faithless!"

For I knew what Clare suffered, and my heart was full of hot bitter anger against the man whose love had been so cruel and so weak.

The anguish of my voice, the suffering in my face, my tearful eyes, seemed for once to render her feelings less bitter.

"Don't pity me, Beatrice—don't!" She spoke hurriedly. "If I am to keep my strength at all, it is only by hardening myself with all the power of scorn, the

coldness of contempt. If you only knew how I hate, loathe, despise myself sometimes for ever letting him see I loved him! Loved him! What did I say? Why, I love him still—a thousand times more than I did then—a thousand times more, though I know how vile and wild and wicked a thing it is, and yet *cannot* conquer it."

There was such despair in her voice, such recklessness in her face, that I trembled and hid my eyes in the folds of her soft white robe.

"Poor child!" she said caressingly. "Do I frighten you? I almost frighten myself. Oh Beatrice, surely love must have been bestowed as a curse to womankind! Those whom we love are the first to scourge and wound us—those who love us—is there in all the world a sight more pitiable? I will not speak of this again after to-night," she resumed presently. "Let me get rid of my burden at once,

then be silent. I have not seen him since, Beatrice—nor her"—she shuddered as she spoke those words—"but a letter reached me on my wedding-day—a tear-stained, pitiful letter; and it revealed all the sorrow, sadness, and remorse of a ruined life, and showed in every line the deadliest sight a woman's eyes can gaze upon—a man's fierce unreasoning despair! And that letter seemed to rest upon my heart while my marriage vows were spoken, and its words were before my eyes as my hand received the circlet of wifehood. We are parted irrevocably now. Death itself cannot unforge the fetters I have riveted; for, though I am too weak to unlove, I am strong enough to despise. Only, Beatrice, I am more wretched than any words can say; and, when you cry, I envy you. Tears are such a long, long way from my eyes now!"

My sobs seemed to choke me, and my tears rained down on her white clasped

hands; for I knew, though her eyes were dry, that her heart was full of anguish bitter as death.

Is it any wonder then that, with this scene in my memory, I stood in that brilliant ball-room of Lady Otho Leintwardine and smiled at the falsehood that called her a happy woman? Is it any wonder that, with the dread of the past haunting me, I trembled to see the hateful presence of the man who had spoilt her life and changed her whole nature?

For I knew one of two things must have happened. He was free, or his love for her was as fierce and cruel as himself.

CHAPTER VI.

> Go weep for those whose hearts have bled
> What time their eyes were dry.

THE ball went on merrily. It was the first ball given at Leintwardine Court since Lord Otho's marriage, the first year having been passed abroad by himself and his wife.

Clare's extreme delicacy was excuse enough for her remaining at the Rectory after her father's death; and it was only the arrival of the new Rector, with a large young family, that at last necessitated our removal. She shrank with the greatest repugnance from going to the Court, and at last Lord Otho noticed it, and asked her if she would prefer to go abroad for the winter and spring. To this she readily

assented, hoping—so it seemed to me—to find in the excitement and beauty of foreign cities some distraction from the weariness and pain that were slowly eating into her heart and destroying all pleasure in life.

It was painful to me to part from her; but I knew it must be done. I knew that, with all Lord Otho's generosity and kindness, he longed to have his wife to himself; and I resisted all my darling's entreaties to accompany them, because I knew that it was better for her—for them both—to set forth on that new strange journey of wedded life alone; and I had not studied her husband's character so closely without discovering that in it lurked one great and unconquerable fault—jealousy.

So I stayed at the Court; and for twelve months they roamed hither and thither, Clare writing to me very often, and always with praise and wonder, of the delights of travel, the beauty of southern scenes,

and the loveliness of the strange lands which for the first time her eyes beheld.

To me that year was very wearisome and dull; but it terminated at last, and Clare came to her own beautiful home, and took her place as its mistress with the easy grace and dignity as natural to her as to any *grande dame* used to courts and palaces.

She excited general admiration; but the chilling reserve and coldness of her manner had grown so habitual that I think it checked much warm interest and kindly sympathy on the part of her own sex.

On this night of the ball she looked lovelier than ever; but it was a loveliness that wore the shadow of discontent—the weariness of long regret.

I saw her waltzing with Vere d'Eyncourt once; and it gave me a momentary feeling of rage and shame.

"She should have refused him," I said indignantly to myself. "The idea of letting

that coward touch her hand or clasp her waist after what has passed!"

When the waltz was over he danced with no one else, a proceeding which angered me still further; for I feared Lord Otho might observe him and remark how persistently he stood and watched Clare.

This was my first ball; but no girl, I feel sure, ever carried so heavy a heart to that memorable festivity, or longed so intensely for it to be over.

I took no interest in my partner's speeches, had no care for my own appearance or the dainty toilet which Clare had selected and given me, felt no pleasnre in the inspiriting strains of the music as I whirled in the giddy waltz. Amidst the music, the laughter, the brilliance of those splendid reception-rooms, the flood of light, the sea of colour, I only thought of that scene in the woods in the summer two short years before, and I dreaded, with a vague unspeakable dread, that

Vere d'Eyncourt's presence here boded ill for my darling's future, even as it had left its shadow on her past.

"If only she cared for Otho," I thought regretfully, as I watched his handsome face and the adoring eyes that always followed her with a pride so great and a love so true; but I knew she did not. Gentle, calm, courteous, she always was; but tender—never. It had often grieved me before, but never as it grieved me to-night; because to-night, for the first time, I knew that he had felt it too when he had seen her face flush and her hand tremble in the presence of another man.

In his long devotion to her—in his singleness of fidelity through the years that he had loved her silently and unknown, the sharpness of such pain as touched him now had never been felt; for he knew that one always so proud and cold would never have betrayed

emotion as she had betrayed it, had not something called it forth of the existence of which he had hitherto had no suspicion.

He had never heard Vere d'Eyncourt's name from her lips—that I knew; and here to-night in his presence she had for once let the mask of coldness drop from her face, and her husband had observed it.

It was growing late; the ball was nearly over; and most of the guests had left.

Chance found me beside Clare as she was bidding farewell to some of the gentlemen; and it happened at the same moment that Vere d'Eyncourt approached to bid adieu.

"Have I your permission to call?" he said softly, as he bent over the white jewelled hand that lay so lightly in his clasp.

"Certainly," answered Clare quietly. "I

am always at home on Thursdays to visitors."

He bit his lip angrily.

"I am only to be classed amongst ordinary acquaintances then? Oh, Clare, is this your forgiveness?"

"Hush!" she said, glancing hurriedly around. "You forget yourself, Captain d'Eyncourt."

"I shall, if you are not kinder. A word or a glance from you can soothe or madden me. Which do you choose?"

"What do you want?" she asked, flushing and paling at the wild, rash words.

"Only half an hour when all the world is not by. I have so much to tell you ere I leave for ever. I am going far away, Clare; and I shall never see you again, when once I leave England behind me. I am sure of it."

"Then come on Friday morning," she said in a low constrained voice that was

almost inaudible. "I shall be at home between twelve and two o'clock."

"I shall come."

He bowed and was gone.

I turned to Clare. She was as white as marble, and trembled in every limb.

"Clare," I said sorrowfully, "is this wise?"

"Did you hear?" she asked.

"Of course I did. Anyone else who stood here could have done the same. Oh, Clare, what a risk you are running!"

"I am perfectly able to manage my affairs without your interference, Beatrice," she said icily. "When I need your advice I shall ask for it."

I stood petrified with amazement. Clare to speak to me thus, Clare to rebuke my jealous love for herself, as she might have rebuked a stranger's interference and officiousness. Hurt and pained I moved away from her side and left the room.

It was her custom always to come to me at night for a few minutes' chat before I went to bed; but this night, or rather morning—for it was long past four when the ball was over—I looked for her in vain; and wearied and sorrowful I at last lay down and slept the feverish restless sleep of a disturbed mind.

It was late when I awoke the next morning, and the sun was shining brightly through my closed blinds. I sprang out of bed hastily, and, completing my morning toilet with what expedition I could, I hurried down to the breakfast-room.

I found Clare there alone. I went up to her, intending to ask forgiveness for the words that had offended her the night before, for I knew I could not bear the pain of her displeasure another day. But at my first words the old sweet smile came to her lips, and she stopped me with a shower of kisses.

"Don't vex yourself; it is not worth a

thought, dear," she said hastily. "And, if you think my conduct imprudent, you shall stop in my room the whole of Friday morning and see whether I am not to be trusted. You forget how proud I am, Beatrice."

"No, Clare," I answered gently; "I do not forget. I only fear that Captain d'Eyncourt may."

She flushed deeply, and bent over the cups and saucers, which she was arranging nervously.

"He is very much changed," she continued presently. "He has left the army, Beatrice, now. Did you know?"

"No," I answered. "He did not think it worth while to take much notice of poor humble me last night. I received no confidences from him."

"He is a widower, too," she went on with nervous haste. "She—that woman—is dead."

"Dead!" I cried. "Did he tell you so?"

"Of course; and, from the few brief words he uttered, I could see what a terrible mistake that marriage had been—what a shameful and sorrowful life he had led with her!"

"Clare," I said wrathfully, "when you were free to listen to his explanations and give him as much pity as you chose, you would not hear him; you said you scorned yourself for letting one thought of tenderness and interest dwell upon a married man. How comes it that you can hear his excuses, and make them for him yourself now when your positions are reversed—now that you, Clare, are a married woman?"

She grew very pale, and her eyes drooped till the long sweeping lashes hid them from my sight.

"You do not understand," she said hesitatingly—"you do not know."

"I know this," I interrupted passionately

—"I know this, Clare—that the selfishness of Vere d'Eyncourt has spoilt your life once. For heaven's sake, my darling, be warned by that past misery, and do not let him spoil it again!"

"There is no fear," she replied coldly. "We are too widely separated by circumstances for either of us to go back to the old past folly. I shall see him once more, Beatrice, to say farewell; and, after that, never, never again!"

Her voice quivered, and she turned away hastily to the open window as though to avoid my pitying gaze.

"Oh Clare!" I said sadly, "is it possible you care for him still? I thought you were getting happier and more contented every day."

She laughed bitterly.

"Happy? No—I am miserable!"

"Oh, hush!"

The warning left my lips too late!

the imploring gesture that had sought to stay those rash wild words was unnoticed by her; and before us, with white stern face and eyes whose pain struck terror to my heart, stood her husband.

CHAPTER VII.

"What sadder can I say?" she said.

In the dead silence that followed my warning the husband and wife stood face to face. At last the barrier between them was broken down; at last the pride and coldness were explained. Those few rash words revealed the terrible truth to Lord Otho's eyes.

"I am sorry to interrupt you," he said coldly, as his eyes rested on Clare where she stood by the window, with the warm October sunlight on her glistening hair—"still more sorry because I have chanced to exemplify the old proverb about listeners—not that I could help overhearing such loud protestations of misery. May I ask,

Clare, as the person most nearly concerned in your welfare, how it comes that you are bewailing your unhappiness so loudly?"

For a moment she was speechless. The terrible irony and coldness of his voice startled her as much as his sudden appearance. Never yet had he spoken to her as he spoke now. As for me, I sat motionless and trembling, not knowing whether to leave the room or remain.

"I should be glad to learn why you are miserable," proceeded Lord Otho, as Clare still continued silent. "You have never complained to me; and I think I have more right to your confidence than your niece. Have you not everything your heart desires? Can I do more for you than I have done? If you are unhappy, with whom does the fault lie?"

His tones changed to those of intense appeal. He looked at her with a longing that overpowered his effort at coldness—the longing to know that she was true to

him, and that he had not a worse thing to learn still.

But she seemed to have no pity; the old proud coldness reigned in her face, the old listless weariness in her voice.

"The fault is mine, I suppose," she answered, turning away from his pleading face. "It need not trouble you."

"Pardon me, it does trouble me," he said. "I married you with the determination to make your happiness my first consideration, and——"

"If you had done that you would never have married me at all!" she interrupted passionately.

Even as the words left her lips I saw that she regretted them; but I saw also that it was too late.

Lord Otho looked at her as if bewildered and stunned by the agony those words caused him. His lips trembled, his eyes sought hers with an anguish of entreaty that for the first time showed her something of

the pain she had dealt him. Yet it did not seem to move her; the haughty calmness and serene indifference of her expression never changed. His own words reached me at last, after a pause that seemed hours long instead of minutes.

"It is rather late in the day to tell me this," he said in a voice that had in it all the bitterness of dead hope, all the anguish of trust betrayed. "You married me of your own free will. Why did you do so great a wrong to yourself and—me? I have a right at least to know that."

"I believe I was mad."

The words left her lips almost unconsciously; for once she forgot restraint, shame, prudence. Her voice had no tremor, her face had no warmth; the memory of the past alone held her then, to the exclusion of all else.

"That is no answer," he said sternly. "A woman who weds a man does so for one of two things—love or convenience.

Which of these has actuated you in your choice?"

"Neither."

The blood rushed over his face, and his hands grasped the chair beside him till it shook.

"Good heaven, Clare, why do you torture me thus? You know how I love you!"

In the yearning tenderness of his voice intense passion betrayed itself. It touched her as she heard it, and over her face came a flush of warmth, a light of wonder that had never been there before.

"You love me too well," she murmured faintly. "I am not worthy of such love."

A fire, wrathful and tempestuous, shone in his eyes at those words; whisperings of jealousy stung him to madness.

"Not worthy? Since when you have discovered that?"

"It does not matter," she said coldly. "What is done cannot be undone. I am your wife now."

"I don't know which of us has greater cause to regret that to-day!" he cried with sudden anger; and the cruel words seemed to chill all the rising warmth and compassion she had begun to feel for him.

She could not read the doubts that shook, the pain that maddened him; she could not know that to hear such words from the lips of the woman he loved—whose every tress of hair was dear to him, whose every change of expression, whose every grace and charm of feature, were graven on his heart—was absolute torture. He had so long loved her, so long believed her calmness and indifference but the inherent pride of her nature, the natural reticence of a pure and lofty mind; and now he had learnt from her own lips that for him she had neither love nor tenderness—scarcely even pity, or she would never have wounded him by a truth so terrible.

I think they had both forgotten my presence long before. The little chance which had betrayed Clare's real feelings and brought about this sad and painful scene made me its unwilling spectator.

It was very painful, very terrible to me to sit there and hear such words passing between two so closely allied, so bound by sacred ties and holy hopes. And yet I dared not move, because I should have to pass Lord Leintwardine; so I sat there still and motionless, with my head bowed on my hands and the hot tears falling through my clasped fingers, unheeded either by Clare or her husband.

"If you regret it you have an easy remedy," she said at last, in answer to those cutting scornful words of his. "You can leave me or let me go away."

"If you can forget your duty so easily, I cannot," he answered sternly. "I have my rank, my position, my name to think

of. They are not trifles to be played with according to the dictates of a woman's fancy."

"Which means that my life is to be marred by your selfishness; it is not my happiness you consider, but the empty honours that the world sees and you value for the homage paid to them."

How could she be so cruel to him? How could she say such words, when she must have seen the agony they caused.

But both were angry now, with the fierce unreasoning anger of disappointed love and jealous fear; and the storm raged more and more fiercely, until at last Clare swept from the room and left him there with a look of intense agony on his face.

He did not move, but sat dazed and still, with the blinding sunshine pouring its bright rays on his bowed head, while great tearless sobs were shaking his strong frame.

I dared not speak. I rose softly from

my seat, and, with a heavy heart and tear-dimmed eyes, I crept from the room.

All through that miserable morning I roamed about the grounds alone, bitterly distressed at heart, wondering what would follow the scene between Clare and her husband. The perplexing question seemed to haunt me continually.

As the luncheon hour drew near, I turned towards the house, and, as I crossed the beautiful terrace that fronted the principal entrance, I saw a group of gentlemen standing there and talking to Clare. "Visitors," I thought. "How unfortunate!"

I might well have called it unfortunate; for, as I came up to the assembled party, I saw they were some of the officers of the Tenth who had been at the ball the previous evening, and, among them, in close and earnest conversation with Clare, was Vere d'Eyncourt.

I was angry and surprised at the audacity of the man in thus following up the acquaintance resumed the night before; and, more than all, I was annoyed with Clare for her very evident encouragement.

Lady Leintwardine was flushed, and talked in an eager, excited way altogether new to her. She evidently avoided my eyes; and, when we all went into the house together at her invitation, she led the way with Captain d'Eyncourt.

At the entrance to the dining-room Lord Otho met us; and I remarked the quiver of his lips, the sudden haughty contraction of his brow, as he noticed his wife's companion. Yet his greeting was courteous, and his conversational powers during the meal that followed were even more brilliantly displayed than usual. No one there could have had any suspicion of the scene that had occurred; no one could have imagined that the lovely woman who sat at the head of the table, with that

face of purest colouring and haughty calm, carried an aching heart in her breast, a world of sorrow behind her laughing eyes.

And more than ever those words haunted me that she had first heard from her false lover's lips, and whose meaning she was learning so rapidly now.

> "But in your bitter world," she said,
> "Face-joy's a costly mask to wear!"

Was it costly to her? Did it cause her such pain, such suffering, as it seemed to me it must? Alas, *that* I could not know! Her own lips would never breathe it—of that I was quite sure—and I could only feel for her in secret.

She never looked at her husband, though again and again I saw his eyes turn beseechingly to her. Already his generous heart was softening, already he was longing to win her pardon and be at peace once more; but she studiously avoided his gaze

and his attention; she seemed to have lost all memory of his presence.

For once in all the many years I had lived with Clare I was furiously angry with her. I knew from the first that she was in the wrong, that she had deceived this noble generous heart, and was now adding fresh fuel to its fire by every look and action. As he had told her, she had married him of her own free will; he had not persuaded or coerced her; and for his love she had but shown indifference.

When her guests rose from the table and wished to leave, she urged them to stay with an eagerness that I had never before seen. They sauntered through the beautiful grounds, talking, laughing, jesting, with an infectious gaiety in their mirth that even allured me from my gravity.

Clare seemed bewitched. The haughty calmness of her usual manner was changed to an excitement almost reckless, an *insouciant* defiance that challenged the

stern rebuke in her husband's eyes, and the pained beseeching of my own.

I saw Vere d'Eyncourt beside her at every moment, and I noted the low earnest tone of his voice as he at last bade her farewell. His head bent low before her, his eyes rested longingly on the fair lustrous beauty of her face. I heard one murmur from his lips as her hand lay in his clasp; it was this:

"You will remember?"

Very hurriedly, very softly, the answer fell from her lips, while her eyes, passing beyond the face so near her, sought half sadly, half defiantly, Lord Otho's stern proud features.

"Yes," she murmured, bowing, and passing on to her other guests to say farewell.

As soon as they had left she went to her own room, telling me she was very tired, and would rest till dinner-time.

Lord Otho also disappeared; and I, for the remainder of that miserable day,

roamed restlessly from place to place, unable to find content in any of my customary pursuits, for I was full of the memory of that scene in the morning, and wondered what would be the end of these bitter jealous heart-burnings, this wretched misunderstanding.

That night, as I sat alone in the firelight of my own room, the door suddenly opened, and Clare swept in. I turned to greet her, but as my eyes fell on her face the words died away from my lips and a great horror seized me.

That ghastly face, those quivering lips, those wild burning eyes—were they Clare's?

A cry of fear burst from me. I sprang to my feet and faced her with a terror as great as her own.

"Clare!" I cried, "what is it?"

Without a word she sank down before the fire, shivering in every limb as if with deadly cold.

I threw myself beside her as she cowered there in the fire's glow, while the radiance streaming over her loosened hair, her snowy arms, her flashing jewels, made her look almost unearthly.

"Clare," I entreated again, "speak to me! For pity's sake tell me, has anything happened?"

Still she answered nothing; my words hardly seemed to reach her. Her eyes glanced wildly around, and from time to time a shiver shook her delicate frame, otherwise she was quite still, quite silent.

I could bear this horror no longer. I laid my hand on the beautiful shoulder, from which her cloak had fallen. I shook her with sudden force, almost in anger, for an instant fear had come to me, and her strange silence rendered it more torturing.

"Clare," I said sternly, "speak! Are you ill? What is it?"

She raised her head, and looked at me at last.

"Leave me a moment," she whispered. "I must think."

I gazed at her in silence, wondering what could have happened.

"Beatrice," she said suddenly, lifting her face to mine, so that I saw how deathly pale it was, save for two spots that burnt on each cheek, "Beatrice, do I look like a murderess?"

I started, and gazed at her in horror-struck amazement.

"Good Heavens, Clare! what do you mean?" I cried in terror.

She laughed. It was a laugh that curdled the blood in my veins with icy fear—such a laugh as might have left the lips of one mad.

"Do I look like a murderess?" she whispered again, crouching low at my feet in her new, strange attitude of fear, and almost, I thought, of shame.

"Oh, Clare, my darling," I cried, "why do you torture me so? Why do you speak such awful words?"

"Because they are true," she said, in a solemn awe-struck voice. "Look at those hands, Beatrice. Are they red with blood? Look at this face. Does it bear the brand of Cain? You think not; you cannot believe, in your pure innocent heart, how vile and wicked I have grown in twelve short hours. Oh, Beatrice, tell me, was it only this morning I spoke those dreadful words? Was it only this morning I told him I regretted our marriage? Was it only this morning I left him in my pride and anger and wicked shameful scorn? Oh, Heaven, have mercy on me! I shall never see him more!"

She writhed at my feet like one in mortal agony. She moaned and shivered there in the warm bright blaze, as if warmth could never enter her chilled and icy form, and in my horror and bewilderment I knelt beside her, praying her to be calm, imploring her by every fond and tender memory of the past not to terrify

me with her wild words, her awful looks, her dreadful accusations.

"You will not believe me," she said at last; "but it is true. Let me tell you while I can—while I may; and then—oh, Beatrice, you will hate me, shrink from me, too! How can I say it?"

"Dear love, be calm," I whispered gently, as I drew the bright young head to my breast and clasped the chill and shivering frame in my trembling arms. "You cannot have done anything that would make me shrink from you—that could change my love. Indeed, indeed you cannot!"

"How you love me!" she cried suddenly. "Oh, Beatrice, it shames me to think of it! I am so little worthy of your love—of any love. You will acknowledge it soon. Beatrice"—her voice grew very low and broken. "I went out alone to-night to meet—Vere d'Eyncourt."

"Oh, Clare!"

"I knew you would shrink from me

when I told you. Oh, Beatrice, wait! Hear me first before you condemn me utterly! I went because he was to leave to-morrow for the East instead of on Friday, as he had at first intended; and when he left this morning, after luncheon, he whispered this, and implored me, if I had one kind or friendly thought of him left, to say one word of forgiveness—of farewell—ere he went from me for ever. I know it was wrong to listen—I know I should not have done it, but in my mind lurked still the wrath and indignation of this morning—and all the more because I regretted my own rash words; all the more because I knew my husband had been deeply wronged and cruelly treated by me, I felt my madness and foolishness urging me on to try the stimulus of this false and mad excitement. Beatrice, as there is a heaven above, I swear no other thought or intention was in my mind than this I have said. But to-night, when you

had gone from the room and he was in his study—as I thought—I left the house alone, and went through the park to the old well—you know it, Beatrice, down in the plantation—the well that they say is haunted, because one of the old lords of Leintwardine Court drowned himself there in a fit of jealous anger many, many years ago. It was there I was to meet Vere. He was waiting for me as he had said; and, Beatrice, though you may not believe it, there was no word uttered between us that I should have dreaded that you or anyone else might hear!"

"I do believe it," I whispered, drawing the shrinking figure closer to me as I spoke.

"He told me the sad miserable tale of that unlucky marriage—of the vile woman whose wiles had ensnared his youth and kept him helpless in his manhood. He told me that the wrong he had done me, the scorn with which I had upbraided him, had never left his memory since."

"But, my darling," I urged, "all this was no news to you. Was it not cowardly, selfish in the extreme, of this man, to make you compromise your reputation by giving him a moonlight meeting to hear it all again?"

"It was my forgiveness he sought," she said wearily. "I had told him I hated him—I would never pardon the shame and suffering he had given me to bear. When we met again I knew that he had never forgotten me; in that respect I was nearer victory than he."

"Oh, Clare, how glad you make me!"

"If I had had any love for him," she went on, "I should never have met him as I did to-night; but ever since this morning—ever since Otho said those terrible words to me—I have been half mad with pain, anger, and shame. I know at last what wrong I have done him. In my eagerness to prove to the man I despised the conquest of my love, I had

ghastly face that looked at me from under the heavy shadow of the boughs and the maze of tangled brushwood. Beatrice, it was the face of my husband!"

I started to my feet with a faint low cry of fear.

"Clare, for mercy's sake think what you are saying!"

"I do think of it. It is that which maddens me!" she shrieked, rising and facing me in the dim firelight with wild eyes and ashy face. "For it is I who have made him a murderer; I whose pitiful weakness armed his hand to avenge his own broken honour; I who bore his name and made him rue the day he gave it me! But he shall not die, he shall not suffer for my sin—he who was far too noble and too good for me. I will proclaim my guilt to all the world. I will say that the deed was mine—mine; that I, the unworthy wife, am alone guilty of the crime of murder!"

With her gleaming eyes, her flowing hair, and her ghastly face, she looked so terrible a sight that my own belief in the truth of her tale was almost shaken.

In vain I tried to hold her, in vain I tried to calm her excited speech and frenzied gestures. She flew to the door like one mad, as if with the intention of summoning the household to hear her rash confession. But, even as she reached it, she stood like one stunned and turned to stone.

"Listen!" she said in a low voice of intense terror. "They have tracked me already. They come!"

As the words left her lips, I heard the slow dull tramp of coming feet echoing through the distant hall.

The sound seemed to paralyze her. I saw her face grow whiter still; but on it now, in its marble pallor, was a look more dreadful than any it had yet worn. I saw the steady gaze of her lovely eyes change to a dull vacant stare. I saw

the curved sweet lips part with an unnerving mirthless laugh; and her face, in its exquisite beauty, assumed, as if by a sorcerer's spell, the fearful semblance of madness.

A moment she stood there, with finger to lip, with cunning vacant smile and wild meaningless look, then stretched out her arms in agonised appeal, and fell across the threshold of my room like a stricken, lifeless thing.

END OF VOL II.

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